PlantSci Newsletter – a monthly round-up of plant science policy headlines and stories

April 2020

This newsletter provides links to published news articles, preserving the original title and summary line. Views or opinions presented are those of the original author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of the Royal Society of Biology.

News and debate

RSB news

RSB launches new Policy Resource Library for the biosciences
The RSB has launched a free, innovative new library of policy resources for the biosciences, providing easy search and access to more than 800 published documents.

Celebrating 10 years of the Royal Society of Biology
Over the course of our anniversary year, the RSB is visually showcasing areas of our work and our impact over the past decade. The RSB’s wealth of science policy work aims to advise and influence government, view our Science Policy impact infographic and see other areas of our work on the anniversary website.

COVID-19 Bulletin
For further detail on COVID-19 research, news and updates, RSB has developed a periodic bulletin collating some of the bioscience behind the outbreak and response, see our webpages to read previous editions and subscribe to the next.

Main RSB webpage on COVID-19
The RSB is working to adapt and ensure our services are delivered to the greatest extent possible whilst also taking into account Public Health England and Government advice during the pandemic. We regularly update this webpage with relevant information about our activities, initiatives and community support.
UK government and awarding bodies announcements
Exam boards and regulating bodies have published further details on how grades will be awarded for the 2020 cohorts, and begun providing support and resource for teachers facilitating at home learning. We are regularly engaging with partners and policymakers and will update this education announcements during COVID-19 pandemic page to keep teachers, schools and Universities fully informed.

Plant health and biosecurity

Strict new controls to protect the UK’s trees and plants against damaging threats
New national measures come into force to safeguard the UK, and its forestry and horticulture industries, from a range of plant health diseases and pests.

Plant disease: UK restricts olive tree imports to halt infection

Controversial ‘gene drive’ could disarm deadly wheat pathogen

Stinkbug invasion in Turkey threatens world hazelnut supplies
Scientists race to halt spread of pungent insect species after it sweeps eight cities.

Crops could face double trouble from insects and a warming climate

Action against oak tree pest underway by Forestry Commission
Tackling oak processionary moth in parts of London and South East England.

Plant breeding

Scientists demonstrate that white flour is the healthiest it’s been in 200 years
Despite concerns over a lack of genetic diversity, modern wheat has more health benefits

Agriculture

EFSA report offers snapshot into pesticide residues on food
EFSA published its annual report on pesticide residues found in food in the European Union on Thursday (2 April) which found that the food commodities analysed were “unlikely to pose concern for consumer health.”

Lord Gardiner of Kimble’s statement at an Extraordinary Virtual meeting of the G20 Agriculture Ministers
On 21 April Lord Gardiner of Kimble delivered a statement at an Extraordinary Virtual meeting of the G20 Agriculture Ministers in response to coronavirus.

Government response to AHDB request for views published
Recommendations to the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board (AHDB) outlined.
NGOs criticise Commission over CAP impact on biodiversity
Environmental NGOs have accused the European Commission of “greenwashing” and cherry-picking positive messages from an EU-funded independent evaluation study about the impact of Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) on habitats, landscapes and biodiversity.

EPA faces court over backing of Monsanto’s controversial crop system
The ninth circuit court of appeals is being asked to overturn the EPA’s approval of a Monsanto herbicide that is allegedly a threat to farm crops across the US.

Food security

Second wave of locusts in east Africa said to be 20 times worse
UN warns of ‘alarming and unprecedented threat’ to food security and livelihoods in the region.

Biodiversity and conservation

Biodiversity in Britain at risk from standstill due to coronavirus
Wildlife Trusts warn of effects from neglected reserves and species loss, to fly-tipping and illegal shooting.

Coronavirus: Lockdown ‘could boost wild flowers’

‘Betrayal of trust’: HS2 criticised over removal of woodland soils
Relocation of soil beginning at ‘completely wrong time’ for wildlife, says Woodland Trust.

HS2 wood clearance to go ahead as Chris Packham legal bid fails
High court has decided there was ‘no real prospect of success’ for judicial review.

Forestry

Climate change: UK forests ‘could do more harm than good’

Cities struggling to boost urban tree cover

Second round of Urban Tree Challenge Fund opens today [30 March]
Second round of £10million fund opens to plant more trees in cities and towns.

£10m to boost tree planting in second auction of Woodland Carbon Guarantee
Farmers and land managers can apply for the scheme to create new woodlands that help tackle the effects of climate change.

Conifer is top tree in urban sound absorption test
Sustainability

Plant root hairs key to reducing soil erosion
The tiny hairs found on plant roots play a pivotal role in helping reduce soil erosion, a new study has found.

Other news

UKCEH targets major global challenges in new strategy
The UK Centre for Ecology & Hydrology (UKCEH) has launched a new five-year research and innovation strategy, outlining its role in tackling the unprecedented global environmental challenges.

‘Exciting’ anti-cancer compound discovered in the humble willow
More than a century after giving the world aspirin, another potential drug has been found in willows – this time with anti-cancer properties

Coronavirus: Chelsea Flower Show moves online for first time

People

Peter Tomkins 1933-2020

Planting hope: the Syrian refugee who developed virus-resistant super-seeds
Plant virologist Dr Safaa Kumari discovered seeds that could safeguard food security in the region – and risked her life to rescue them from Aleppo

Dr Guru Radhakrishnan selected for Forbes Under 30 list
Dr Guru Radhakrishnan, Research Fellow at the John Innes Centre, has been named on the Forbes 30 under 30 Europe list.

Opinion

Why Ghana’s smallholders aren’t excited by the latest ‘Green Revolution’

Opportunities

How you can help with COVID-19
An RSB webpage collating routes through which individuals and businesses can offer their help to support the national effort to respond to the spread of COVID-19.

Intermediate Biology Olympiad 2020
The Intermediate Biology Olympiad 2020 (2nd – 9th June) for students aged 16-17 is now open for registrations. The competition challenges students’ bioscience knowledge and encourages them to continue studying the biosciences beyond school/college. Students can enter free of charge. Please contact Raghav Selvam with any enquiries. Closes: 22 May 2020
RSB Outreach and Engagement Award 2020
Are you a bioscience researcher involved in science communication? If you work in any sector of UK biosciences, apply for the Royal Society of Biology Outreach and Engagement Award 2020 and win up to £1500. Closes: 26 June 2020

Royal Society of Biology Photography Competition 2020
‘Our changing world’ is the theme of this year’s Royal Society of Biology Photography Competition. Life on Earth is dynamic and we invite you to capture these transformations. The competition has two age categories each with a cash prize: 18 and over (£1000) and under 18s (£500). Closes: 24 July 2020

The Nancy Rothwell Award 2020
The Nancy Rothwell Award 2020 specimen drawing competition for 7 – 18 year olds is now open for submissions. Prizes include an experience day at the Royal Veterinary College for students, and their school can also win £100. Visit the Royal Society of Biology website for more information. Closes: 31 July 2020

Consultations

UKRI Open Access Review Consultation
UKRI is reviewing its open access policies for peer-reviewed research articles and academic books that result from research supported by UKRI. The RSB response to this consultation is currently in draft. Please contact consultation@rsb.org.uk for more information and if you would like to contribute. Closes: 29 May 2020

Impact of Covid-19 disruptions on schools and higher education institutions
An inquiry by the education select committee is open until end of May, considering the implementation of the critical workers policy, fairness of qualification arrangements and progression to next stages of education, and financial implications of closures for Higher Education Institutions. If you plan to submit evidence, please let us know by emailing consultation@rsb.org.uk Closes: 31 May 2020

A new UK research funding agency
The Government has declared it intends to create a new agency to be “broadly modelled” on the US ARPA, which will provide long term funding to support visionary high-risk, high-pay off scientific, engineering, and technology ideas. The House of Commons Science and Technology Committee will inquire formally into the nature and purpose of this new UK research funding agency and invites written submissions. The RSB response to this consultation is currently in draft. Please contact consultation@rsb.org.uk for more information and if you would like to contribute. Closes: 30 June 2020
UK Science, Research and Technology Capability and Influence in Global Disease Outbreaks
The Science and Technology Committee will inquire formally into the place of UK research, science and technology in the national and global response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and what lessons should be learned for the future. Please contact consultation@rsb.org.uk for more information and if you would like to contribute.
Closes: 31 July 2020

RSB Policy Resource Library now online
The RSB has created a searchable, digital library of more than 800 statements, responses, briefings and other policy resources produced by the RSB and our Member Organisations across the biosciences. This collection is freely and openly accessible to everyone, including members and non-members, through the mySociety portal (no registration necessary).

Events

GARNet-Presents Webinar Series
This new, fortnightly webinar series will see two speakers present their research using the GoToWebinar platform. The 20 minute talks will be followed by time for questions, and the first session features Jonathan Jones (Sainsbury Laboratory, Norwich) and Yoselin Benitez-Alfonso (University of Leeds). Places are limited and participants will need to register in advance.
5 May 2020, 15:00 BST

The RSB has postponed all in person events due to take place before 1st September 2020. We will aim to reschedule, or hold virtually, all cancelled events where possible, and updated information will be made available on the RSB events pages. These events will hopefully run later in year or in 2021.

We are aware that a number of events previously advertised in the Plant Science Newsletter have been cancelled owing to the novel coronavirus Covid-19. We recommend also checking other external event webpages for updates and continuing to monitor and follow official advice.

And finally...

10 Pioneer-era Apple Types, Thought Extinct, Found in Forgotten Orchards Across Pacific Northwest
A team of retirees that scours the remote ravines and windswept plains of the Pacific Northwest for long-forgotten pioneer orchards has rediscovered 10 apple varieties that were believed to be extinct — the largest number ever unearthed in a single season by the nonprofit Lost Apple Project.
Growing the future – a report from the UK Plant Sciences Federation (UKPSF)

Growing the future highlights to policymakers and others the excellence of plant science in the UK, and its importance to the biosciences, the economy, and society both at home and around the world. The report is available to download here.

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