

Plant Science Newsletter – a monthly round-up of policy headlines and stories

March 2021

This newsletter provides links to published news articles from a range of sources. 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

Top stories

[Ten-year roadmap to guide UK plant science](#)

UK Research and Innovation has announced the new UK Plant Science Research Strategy. The green roadmap for the next 10 years sets out clear goals for research and innovation involving plants.

[RSB urges PM to reconsider research funding cuts: reduction could “leave a lasting scar on UK science”](#)

Dr Mark Downs CSci FRSB, chief executive of the RSB, has written to the Prime Minister voicing sector concerns following the announcement of £120 million cut to the Global Challenge Research Fund.

[Interim Office for Environmental Protection to be launched](#)

The new environmental watchdog for England will be launched on an interim basis in July, ahead of its formal establishment as part of the Environment Bill, under plans set out by the Government.

Plant health and biosecurity

[UK scientists confirm arrival of brown marmorated stink bugs](#)

Invasive bug that creates marks on fruit and vegetables probably hitched ride into Britain on packaging crates, The Guardian reports.

[Weeds now represent a greater inherent threat to crop production than before the advent of herbicides, study finds](#)

Crops are now more vulnerable to weeds than before the advent of herbicides, according to a new study which says weeds pose an unprecedented threat to our food security.

[Slugs and snails crawl back to top of RHS annual garden pests chart](#)

Slugs and snails are back at the top of the pests chart, the Royal Horticultural Society reveals in The Guardian.

Plant breeding

[RSB responds to Defra genome editing consultation](#)

In its response to Defra's consultation on the regulation of genetic technologies, the RSB highlighted the potential benefits to society that changes to regulation could enable. The response proposed that organisms should be assessed on their characteristics, rather than the methods used in breeding. Recognising the importance of public support for any changes to regulation, the RSB emphasised the need for clarity and transparency about how products are created and approved, and called for a broad public dialogue."

[Government looks poised to lift the ban on gene editing in agriculture](#)

The technique is currently banned in the UK and Europe on safety concerns – with just a handful of scientific trials allowed so far, reports iScience.

[Genome-edited wheat can reduce cancer risk from toast](#)

UK scientists have used genome editing to reduce a cancer-causing compound, acrylamide, commonly found in toast.

Agriculture

['Bee-killing' pesticide now will not be used on UK sugar beet fields](#)

Government gave emergency authorisation to a neonicotinoid earlier this year - but says weather conditions meant chemical was not needed, The Guardian reports.

[Voting Report on AHDB Potato ballot is with Ministers](#)

A ballot to decide the future of the AHDB Potato levy has concluded and the voting report has been passed to Ministers for a decision on what happens next.

[Century-old olive trees felled as Spain's farmers try to cut costs](#)

Plunge in global olive oil prices means hard decisions for Spanish olive oil producers.

Food security

[Over 30 million people 'one step away from starvation', UN warns](#)

Acute hunger is likely to soar in more than 20 countries in the next few months, with the pandemic, climate crisis and conflict driving 'alarming' levels of global hunger, the UN warns.

[Food waste: Amount thrown away totals 900 million tonnes](#)

More than 900 million tonnes of food is thrown away every year, according to a global report from the UN Environment Programme.

[Farmers and rights groups boycott food summit over big business links](#)

Some groups say they will boycott UN conference on hunger because of perceived focus on agro-business over ecological and traditional approaches.

[The UN food systems summit will consider all stakeholders' interests](#)

UN secretary general's special envoy for the 2021 food systems summit responds to reports of a boycott in a letter to The Guardian.

Biodiversity and conservation

['Catastrophic': UK has lost 90% of seagrass meadows, study finds](#)

Scientists say restoring the lush habitats would boost wildlife, protect coasts and store carbon.

[Lawn growers throw in the towel as meadows replace perfect stripes](#)

The Guardian reports on a move away from traditional mowing regimes, as aesthetics and wildlife value come under scrutiny.

[Prehistoric plant found at Saltholme nature reserve](#)

Bearded stonewort, which dates back 460 million years and is critically endangered, was discovered in newly created ponds at RSPB Saltholme, BBC News reports.

[First known gene transfer from plant to insect identified](#)

Discovery that a whitefly uses a stolen plant gene to elude its host's defences may offer a route to new pest-control strategies, Nature News reports.

[Vertical mulcher rides to rescue of ancient Northumberland peat bog](#)

The Guardian describes a project to clear trees and restore Border Mires dating from ice age.

Forestry

[Climate change: Consumer pose 'growing threat' to tropical forests](#)

Rising imports in wealthy countries of coffee, cocoa and other products are a "growing threat" to forests in tropical regions according to a new study.

[£150 million government investment to protect the world's rainforests](#)

Government announces funding to protect tropical rainforests, regions and communities across Africa, Asia and Latin America.

[Poland to resume logging in primeval forest](#)

BBC News reports that logging will resume in the primeval Bialowieza forest, after a ruling that Poland had broken EU law by felling trees over 100 years old.

[Indigenous peoples by far the best guardians of forests – UN report](#)

Preserving Latin America's forests is vital to fight the climate crisis and deforestation is lower in indigenous territories, according to a UN report, described in The Guardian.

Sustainability

[One of Earth's giant carbon sinks may have been overestimated - study](#)

The potential of soils to slow climate change by soaking up carbon may be less than previously thought, research suggests.

[Grasslands stopped fighting climate change over a century ago](#)

World's oldest ecology experiment shows 'hypersensitive' grasses unable to absorb any more carbon dioxide.

[Farmers invited to take first step towards greener future](#)

Government publishes details of the pilot of the Sustainable Farming Incentive.

People

[Ministers appoint new Trustees to Kew board](#)

Professor Christopher Gilligan, Sir Paul Nurse, David Richardson, Judith Batchelar and Professor Ian Graham have all been appointed as Trustees.

Opinion

['A sip can kill': did a chemical company misrepresent data to avoid making a safer product?](#)

The Guardian reviews claim from a former Syngenta scientist that lives could have been saved with tweaks to the formulation of weedkiller paraquat.

[Revamp of UK CRISPR regulation will require public trust](#)

An editorial in Nature describes moves to consider innovative ways of regulating gene editing in food and farming in the UK, and argues that robust processes and public confidence will be vital for success.

[Scientists need to face both facts and feelings when dealing with the climate crisis](#)

Writing in The Guardian, researcher Kimberly Nicholas describes how acknowledging sadness at what is lost can help us safeguard the future.

Opportunities

Can you help to inspire the next generation of researchers?

The [Nuffield Research Placements](#) (NRP) programme is looking for RSB members who can provide supervised online research projects for post-16 students this summer. These supervised research question activities will be set within a virtual learning environment over a two- to three-week period in July and/or August and are a great opportunity for you to benefit from a highly motivated student's help on a current problem. If you would like to express your interest in supporting the Nuffield Research Placements programme this summer, please [complete this short form](#).

Closes: 30 April 2021

[BSPP Undergraduate Vacation Bursary \(Including Remote Working\)](#)

The BSPP undergraduate vacation bursary will provide support for work on specified research projects during the summer vacation.

Closes 30 April 2021

#MembershipMay

We will be celebrating RSB members throughout the month of May, as part of our social media #MembershipMay campaign. For the opportunity to showcase your bioscience interests/work and share what being part of the RSB means to you, email shameema.haque@rsb.org.uk to fill in a short questionnaire and be featured on our platforms.

[BSPP 40th Anniversary Harper Adams MSc in Plant Pathology Studentship](#)

In honour of our 40th anniversary, the British Society for Plant Pathology will provide full funding for a student to study the MSc in Plant Pathology at Harper Adams University, starting in September 2021. The selected candidate will become the BSPP 40th Anniversary MSc Student.

Closes 30 June 2021

Royal Society of Biology Photography Competition 2021

'Interconnected' is the theme of this year's Royal Society of Biology Photography Competition. Life on Earth is connected and this year we invite you to capture these interactions. The competition has two age categories each with a cash prize: 18 and over (£1000) and under 18s (£500).

Closes: 23 July 2021

The Nancy Rothwell Award 2021

The Nancy Rothwell Award 2021 specimen drawing competition for 7 – 18 year olds is now open for submissions. Prizes include art materials for students and their school can also win £100. Visit the Royal Society of Biology [website](#) for more information.

Closes: 30 July 2021

RSB ambassadors - open for applications

Are you an enthusiastic, active and engaged member of the RSB who would like to act as a key contact for the RSB at your workplace, while encouraging others to get involved? [Apply now](#) to become an [RSB ambassador](#). N.B. At this stage, we are only accepting applications from UK-based members at the AMRSB, MRSB and FRSB grade.

Consultations

Proposed release of the non-native biological control agent *Listronotus elongatus* for the control of *Hydrocotyle ranunculoides* (floating pennywort) in England

Defra are seeking views on whether the non-native weevil *Listronotus elongatus* should be released into England to reduce the impact of the invasive weed *Hydrocotyle ranunculoides*.

Closes: 7 May 2021

Draft policy statement on environmental principles

The Government is consulting on the draft policy statement on environmental principles which sets out how those five internationally recognised environmental principles should be interpreted and proportionately applied.

Closes: 2 June 2021

R&D Tax Reliefs

The Government launched a review of R&D tax reliefs at Budget 2021. This wide ranging consultation seeks views from stakeholders on the current R&D tax relief schemes.

Closes: 2 June 2021

RSB Policy Resource Library 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

[HUBS Annual Meeting 2021](#)

Register now for the [Heads of University Biosciences](#) (HUBS) annual conference online. This two-day virtual conference is an opportunity to hear from diverse and influential voices in higher education. It will include sessions on research, policy, learning and teaching, diversity and inclusion and awarding gaps. Keynote speakers include Professor Dame Ottoline Leyser FRSB (UKRI) and Professor Julia Buckingham FRSB (Universities UK).

12-13 April 2021

[International Advances In Plant Virology 2021](#)

Plant viruses are excellent study subjects, providing keys and probes to analyse and dissect many aspects of the plant biology. This virtual conference is open to all researchers studying plant viruses and virus-induced diseases at any level, from molecular to ecological scale, including evolutionary aspects of plant viruses and virus-induced diseases. Registration closes 19 April 2021.

20-22 April 2021

[#UKPlantSciPresents webinar series](#)

The series returns for its spring season. View the full range of presentations and register for free [here](#). Recordings of all past webinars are available to view, and further webinar titles will be announced as the year progresses. Thanks to support for this series from the Monogram Small Grains Network, Bristol Centre for Agricultural Innovation, NovogeneUK and Arabidopsis Events UK.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic all RSB events will continue to take place online and updated information will be made available on the [RSB events pages](#). We recommend also checking other external event webpages for updates and continuing to monitor and follow official advice.

And finally...

['Tree hunter' nears end of 13 year nature project](#)

A 'landscape detective' who has been recording ancient trees along the English and Welsh border for 13 years has almost completed his project, BBC News reports.

[Growing the future report](#)

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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