

Science Policy Newsletter – a weekly round-up of policy headlines and stories

22 January 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

Royal Society of Biology news

[COVID-19 Bulletin](#)

For further detail on COVID-19 research, news and updates, RSB produces a monthly bulletin collating some of the bioscience behind the outbreak and response. The latest edition, published on the 18th of January 2021, includes epidemiological updates and assessment of public health strategies; updates on testing, on new drugs, and on vaccine development, roll-out and communications; looking back on how science rose to the challenge through 2020 and into 2021; and a discussion on ways you can look after yourself and others in 2021. See [our webpages](#) to read previous editions and subscribe to the next.

[Natural capital priorities for coping with change](#)

Watch again or listen to the Natural Capital Initiative's lively panel discussion last week, in which the RSB's Dr Laura Bellingan talked to Professor Sir Ian Boyd from the University of St Andrews and Assistant Director Ben Combes from PwC about the science and solutions needed to build back better with more resilience.

Health and biomedicine

[AI and healthcare](#)

There are various applications of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in healthcare, such as helping clinicians to make decisions, monitoring patient health, and automating routine administrative tasks. This POSTnote gives an overview of these uses, and their potential impacts on the cost and quality of healthcare, and on the workforce.

[New Every Mind Matters campaign](#)

A Government press release describing how a new campaign has been launched to support the nation's mental health.

[National consortium to study threats of new SARS-CoV-2 variants](#)

A new national research project to study the effects of emerging mutations in SARS-CoV-2 will be launched with £2.5 million funding, says UK Research and Innovation.

Food and drink

[Yellow mealworm safe for humans to eat, says EU food safety agency](#)

Yellow mealworm finger foods, smoothies, biscuits, pasta and burgers could soon be mass produced across Europe after the insect became the first to be found safe for human consumption by the EU food safety agency, reports the Guardian.

[Brexit will increase food supply chain costs, warn business groups](#)

Food and Drink Federation Chief Executive, Ian Wright, told MPs that there will be short and long-term costs to "re-engineering" supply chains, reports the BBC.

Agriculture, aquaculture and fisheries

[Environment Agency invests £48 million in projects to benefit fishing](#)

The Environment Agency has published its Annual Fisheries report detailing investment to enhance fisheries and make improvements for anglers, angling facilities and the environment during 2019-20.

[Brexit: Republic of Ireland to lose 15% of fishing quota](#)

The fishing fleet in the Republic of Ireland will be one of the worst affected by the handback of quota under the UK/EU trade deal, says the BBC.

[Brexit: Welsh seafood in 'grave state' over port delays](#)

The environment minister has warned that the Welsh seafood industry needs urgent help to survive Brexit disruption at its ports, reports the BBC.

Forestry

[Woodland creation](#)

Large-scale woodland creation is being promoted internationally to mitigate climate change. It can also supply other benefits, such as improving biodiversity, air and water quality. This POSTnote summarises key factors influencing how much carbon is taken up by woodland, the different objectives of woodland creation, constraints to increasing UK tree cover and different finance options.

[Forests go into growth 'overdrive' to recover from drought – new study](#)

The Conversation addresses how Scots pine has responded to past droughts and how resilient it is likely to be.

Environment and ecology

[Top scientists warn of 'ghastly future of mass extinction' and climate disruption](#)

A sobering new report says the world is failing to grasp the extent of threats posed by biodiversity loss and the climate crisis, reports the Guardian.

[Research reveals how crop roots penetrate hard soils](#)

According to UK Research and Innovation, scientists have discovered a signal that causes roots to stop growing in hard soils, which can be 'switched off' to allow them to punch through compacted soil.

[Enormous pigeon-eating catfish wreaking havoc on Europe's ecosystems](#)

National Geographic describes how the largest freshwater fish, native to Eastern Europe, is an invasive species that threatens native fish already in decline.

Water and air

[Climate crisis: record ocean heat in 2020 supercharged extreme weather](#)

Scientists have reported that the temperatures are likely to be increasing faster than at any time in the past 2,000 years, according to the Guardian.

[NGOs demand action not promises as EU accused of 'failing to protect seas'](#)

The Guardian covers how environmental groups propose an urgent plan to stop overfishing and safeguard marine life, as existing laws go unenforced.

[European rivers are littered with barricades, but a movement grows to remove them](#)

There's more than one barrier per mile on average in Europe's rivers, which chokes off life in these critical arteries; public awareness is sparking calls to take out small dams, weirs, and ramps, reports National Geographic.

Climate and energy

[COVID curbed carbon emissions in 2020 — but not by much](#)

Nature news reports: despite sharp drops early in the pandemic, global emissions of carbon dioxide picked up in the second half of the year, new data shows.

[Countries adapting too slowly to climate breakdown, UN warns](#)

A report says not enough funding is being made available to deal with the effects of extreme weather, according to the Guardian.

Waste

[Clothes washing linked to 'pervasive' plastic pollution in the Arctic](#)

The Guardian describes how the Arctic is 'pervasively' polluted by microplastic fibres that most likely come from the washing of synthetic clothes by people in Europe and North America.

[Plastic bag charge to double to 10p from April in Scotland](#)

The minimum cost of carrier bags in Scotland is set to double to 10p from 1st April, reports the BBC.

Animal research

[Hepatitis D: how the virus made the jump from animals to humans](#)

Writing in the Conversation, researchers explain how hepatitis D (a deltavirus) passed from animals to humans and then slowly travelled around the world.

Exiting the EU

[What does the Brexit deal mean for research?](#)

The Campaign for Science and Engineering's Assistant Director, Daniel Rathbone, takes a look at what the Brexit Deal means for the research sector.

Research funding and higher education policy

[Update from UK Research and Innovation Chief Executive Ottoline Leyser](#)

UK Research and Innovation's Chief Executive Professor Dame Ottoline Leyser provides an update on the research and innovation community's extraordinary response to the pandemic and the year ahead.

['Digital poverty' could lead to lost generation of university students, vice-chancellors say](#)

Higher education bodies tell the Education Secretary, Gavin Williamson, little has been done to help disadvantaged students access remote learning, reports the Guardian.

[Latest lockdown should not lead to lost learning, says regulator](#)

The Office for Students has said universities should do all they can to deliver the teaching they have promised to students and alternative arrangements where this is not possible. This may include putting on extra lectures, repeating parts of the course, or fee refunds.

Schools education policy

[A-level and GCSE grades: Call to scrap 'panic-inducing' tests](#)

The BBC covers how an A-level student has started a campaign to scrap any external exam assessments in Wales this year, calling for grades to be decided by teachers.

[Hundreds of thousands more laptops to support disadvantaged pupils learn at home](#)

A Government press release describing how the Government has boosted a laptop and tablet programme with a further 300,000 devices – taking the total to 1.3 million.

Open access and publication policy

[Science family of journals announces change to open-access policy](#)

Subscription journals will let some Plan S funded researchers share accepted manuscripts under open licences, reports Nature News.

Diversity and inclusion

[National Strategy for Disabled People survey](#)

The Disability Unit in the Cabinet Office has launched a public survey to gather views and experiences for the National Strategy of Disabled People.

[Cell's publisher invites statements in papers about studies' diversity and inclusion efforts](#)

AAAS Science reports on how the declarations can highlight the authors' personal characteristics or elements of a study's design.

Digital technologies

[£28 million to trial innovative new uses of 5G to improve people's lives](#)

The joint investment from the Government and businesses will fund nine UK-wide projects that will seize the benefits of 5G and help British industries.

International news

[Coronavirus disease \(COVID-19\) Situation Dashboard](#)

The World Health Organisation summarises the reported number of confirmed COVID-19 cases and deaths.

[Vaccine makers in Asia rush to test jabs against fast-spreading COVID variant](#)

Investigations are underway in China and India over fears that new SARS-CoV-2 variants could undermine vaccines, reports Nature News.

[US greenhouse gas emissions fell 10% in 2020 as Covid curbed travel](#)

The Guardian covers new figures showing that planet-heating emissions in the US fell by more than 10% in 2020, a record drop generated by extraordinary reductions in travel and industrial activity in the teeth of the coronavirus pandemic.

[Supply delays hit planned Ebola vaccine stockpile](#)

Researchers have stated supply chain delays must be addressed to speed up the creation of a stockpile of vaccines against the deadly Ebola disease.

Committee vacancies

[RSB seeking applications for a new Chair of Education & Science Policy \(ESP\) Committee](#)

Our ESP Committee is one of the two main advisory committees to RSB Council. Full details, including the role description, selection criteria, and the online application form are available via [mySociety](#).

Closes: 31 January 2021

RSB President

The RSB is seeking nominations for a new President of Council. You may nominate yourself, or someone else without involving them. At this stage we are seeking only the full name of the nominee, and a link to their professional web page. Nominations should be received by RSB by midnight on 31st January 2021 for shortlisting by the RSB Nominations Committee in February, and discussion at the Council Meeting in March. Following agreement the President-elect will be announced at the Annual General Meeting in May 2021, and will take a non-active shadowing role, prior to taking office in May 2022. Further details and the brief nomination form are available [online](#), with nominations to be submitted via SurveyMonkey.

Opportunities

[RSB Gopher Science Lab free online training for primary teachers](#)

The Royal Society of Biology is offering 40 state-funded primary schools in the UK the opportunity for four teachers to have free access to RSB's Gopher Science Lab [online training course](#). With thanks to generous support from [The Worshipful Company of Horners](#) enabling RSB to offer this opportunity. Primary school teachers working in UK based, state-funded, primary schools can email [Amanda Hardy](#) to apply on behalf of their school to access the paid-for online training places on a first come first served basis.

[RSB's Science at Home festival resources online](#)

RSB and some of our science friends have worked together to run our first ever virtual science festival - [RSB's Science at Home](#) - with activities and resources available online, so you can now take part in the festival any time that suits you. With a range of videos, activities, games and more straight to your computer screen to entertain and engage you and your family. Take part today and tell your friends via [#RSBScienceAtHome](#).

[RSB School Biology Teacher of the Year Award](#)

Do you know an amazing biology teacher? Students, parents and carers can now [suggest a teacher](#) who they think is outstanding for the Royal Society of Biology's School Biology Teacher of the Year Award. Visit the Society's [website](#) for further information.

Closes: 29 January 2021

Consultations

[Reducing ammonia emissions from urea fertilisers](#)

As ammonia emissions are predominantly from agriculture (87%) and around 8% are from the use of solid urea fertilisers, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs seeks your views on three policy options that give us the greatest ammonia emission reductions from regulating the use or sale of solid urea fertilisers.

Closes: 26 January 2021

[Live animal exports: improvements to animal welfare in transport](#)

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is seeking views on ending live animal exports for slaughter and fattening, starting in or transported through England or Wales, and on further improvements to animal welfare in transport.

Closes: 28 January 2021

[Equity in the STEM workforce](#)

The All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Diversity and Inclusion in Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) has launched its inquiry into equity in the UK STEM workforce and is currently inviting submissions of evidence. Full details of the inquiry and call for evidence can be found on the [APPG](#)

[website](#). The RSB response to this inquiry is currently in draft. Please contact consultation@rsb.org.uk for more information and if you would like to contribute.

Closes: 29 January 2021

[Farm Animal Welfare Committee's opinion on the welfare of animals during transport](#)

The Scottish Government's consultation considers how the recommendations made by the Farm Animal Welfare Committee might be implemented in Scotland and the potential impact of implementation on stakeholders.

Closes: 26 February 2021

[Sustainable use of pesticides](#)

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Devolved Administrations have produced a revised draft National Action Plan for the Sustainable Use of Pesticides. This consultation allows you to give your views on the plan that covers the next five years and aims to minimise the risks and impacts of pesticides to human health and the environment while ensuring pests and pesticide resistance are managed effectively.

Closes: 26 February 2021

[Greenhouse gas removals](#)

The Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy and HM Treasury are seeking evidence on greenhouse gas removal methods, and views on policy mechanisms that could incentivise and facilitate their development and deployment.

Closes: 26 February 2021

[Defra consultation on the regulation of genetic technologies](#)

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is consulting on the regulation of gene edited (GE) organisms and gathering views on the wider regulatory framework governing genetically modified organisms (GMOs). 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 17 March 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

[Translating UK knowledge and research into impact: Physiology and KE](#)

25 January 2021

14:00 – 15:00 GMT

The Physiological Society are excited to launch 'Translating UK knowledge and research into impact: Physiology and knowledge exchange', a report from The Physiological Society and National Centre for Universities and Business (NCUB) exploring the impact of physiology to knowledge exchange (KE). The event will showcase how physiology knowledge and research is translated into impact, revealing the findings of the survey of physiologists and higher education institutions.

[Engaging with Parliament: Mark Logan MP](#)

24 February 2021

18:15 – 19:00 GMT

This online event will give members the chance to engage with Mark Logan MP, member of the House of Commons Science and Technology Select Committee and MP for Bolton North East. The event will focus on the role of the Science and Technology Select Committee and current open inquiries.

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...

[Ancient dire wolf DNA analysed for the first time - with surprising results](#)

DNA analysis has found that extinct dire wolves, made famous in the TV show Game of Thrones, are only distant cousins of modern grey wolves, reports the Natural History Museum.

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