

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

26 March 2021

Dear readers, the newsletter team will be taking a short spring break before returning with the next edition on 23rd April 2021. In the meantime, we would like to take this opportunity to thank you for your readership.

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

[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.

[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.

[RSB responds to Defra consultation on improvement to animal welfare in transport](#)

In its response to Defra's [consultation](#) on improvement to animal welfare in transport, the RSB focused mainly on the specific requirements of research animal transport but also provided evidence in relation to thermal conditions and ventilation for livestock species in transport. Our main recommendations are to consider the specificities of research animal transport outside the scope of this consultation, to establish appropriate rules that take into consideration species-specific welfare needs and the most welfare considerate transport routes, and to set up a transport authorisation system that achieves optimal targets of biosecurity and animal welfare, without hampering scientific collaborations across borders.

The RSB sent a [separate letter](#) to the Scottish Government Agriculture and Rural Delivery Directorate in relation to the Scottish consultation on the welfare of animals in transport, which is a devolved policy matter.

[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 1st of March 2021, includes updates on: SARS-CoV-2 viral variants; the immunology of COVID-19; public health responses and epidemiological research internationally; advances in COVID-19 treatment; and international vaccines research and roll-out. Plus, tackling misinformation on vaccinations; a new Google-funded open data repository; and funding for research into the impact of COVID-19 on UK farmer's mental health. See [our webpages](#) to read previous editions and subscribe to the next.

Health and biomedicine

[Lab-grown structures mimic human embryo's earliest stage yet](#)

The experiments use human cells to imitate the blastocyst phase — offering a crucial window into human development, reports Nature News.

[Gene therapy innovation hubs launched](#)

The Medical Research Council and LifeArc, with support from the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council, have announced £18m of funding will support the creation of three dedicated facilities to advance the clinical development of new genetic treatments.

[Scientists grew tiny tear glands in a dish — then made them cry](#)

Organoids made of tear-producing cells offer chances to study, and possibly treat eye disorders, reports Nature News.

Food and drink

[Millions sign up to anti-food-waste apps to share their unused produce](#)

With the average UK family throwing out £730 of surplus items a year, eco-conscious consumers have found a hi-tech fix, says The Guardian.

[First report from new Food and You 2 survey published](#)

The Food Standards Agency has published the findings from Food and You 2: Wave 1, their new more frequent and flexible flagship consumer survey.

Agriculture, aquaculture and fisheries

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

The United Kingdom is considering innovative ways of regulating gene editing in food and farming. Robust processes and public confidence will be vital for success, according to this Nature Editorial.

[UK agrees fishing catch limits with EU and Norway](#)

A Government press release describing how the agreement promotes the sustainable management and long-term viability of cod, haddock, plaice, whiting, herring, and saithe stocks in the North Sea. The catch levels agreed for 2021 are worth over £184 million to the UK fishing industry.

[Opinion: What might the future of the UK countryside look like?](#)

At a time when political division and social inequality is rife, communicating a shared vision for a sustainable, equitable future for rural land could offer a point of reconciliation, writes Jamie Upton, Policy Advisor for the Royal Society.

Environment and ecology

[The United Nations' Kunming biodiversity summit delayed a second time](#)

The Guardian covers how the Covid pandemic continues to hamper plans for key gathering to agree targets on protecting nature.

[Protecting the ocean delivers a comprehensive solution for climate, fishing and biodiversity](#)

National Geographic covers how a ground-breaking scientific study from 26 international experts offers the most comprehensive assessment to date of where to ramp up strict ocean protection to increase seafood security, curb biodiversity loss, and provide a cost effective solution to climate change, as well as economic benefits.

[Trawl fishing ban off Sussex coast aims to restore seaweed forests](#)

A bylaw supported by David Attenborough protects large area of seabed to allow kelp to regrow, reports The Guardian.

[How we discovered a hidden world of fungi inside the world's biggest seed bank](#)

Writing for The Conversation, researchers from Kew Gardens describe how they found hundreds of fungi hidden inside seeds from the Millennium Seed Bank, some of which are likely to be species new to science and could be crucial for the future of plant health.

Water and air

[UK could face water shortages if action is not taken to conserve supplies](#)

The Environment Agency says we do not have enough infrastructure to store water from wetter winters for the drier summers, reports Sky News.

Climate and energy

[UKRI awards £171m in UK decarbonisation to nine projects](#)

UK Research and Innovation has announced a milestone in UK decarbonisation, with the award of £171 million funding across nine significant projects.

[Climate change bill plan due before NI Executive](#)

Draft proposals for Northern Ireland's first climate change bill will be brought to the Executive shortly, says BBC News.

Waste

[Consultation on plan to remove harmful chemicals from environment](#)

A Government consultation opens on plans to monitor, reduce and eliminate Persistent Organic Pollutants.

Animal research

[New tools define immune cells in cattle to aid treatment of disease](#)

Scientists at the BBSRC-funded Pirbright Institute have identified new immune cells in cattle, that could help to investigate and treat livestock and human diseases.

[Aberdeen's grey squirrels to be tagged and tracked](#)

BBC News covers how grey squirrels in Aberdeen are to be tagged and tracked in an effort to understand the animals' behaviour in urban areas.

Research funding and higher education policy

[Opinion: Cuts to scientific research would be 'paradoxical'](#)

The House of Commons Science and Technology Committee has published a letter to Prime Minister Boris Johnson, expressing concerns about potential cuts and reductions facing the UK's science budget.

[UKRI endorses review to reduce red tape for UK researchers](#)

UK Research and Innovation has endorsed a new independent review into research bureaucracy launched by Science Minister Amanda Solloway.

[Non-EU scientists face exclusion from sensitive Horizon projects](#)

Most collaboration will continue, but an emphasis on building the EU's 'strategic autonomy' means academics in Israel, the UK and Switzerland could be shut out of some areas, according to Times Higher Education.

[UK launches national centre to accelerate AI use in universities](#)

A team of experts will pilot AI products and provide support and training to institutions, reports Times Higher Education.

Diversity and inclusion

[Opinion: Inequity of COVID-19 vaccines grows 'more grotesque every day' – WHO chief](#)

Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General of the World Health Organisation spoke to journalists about the impact of inequitable distribution of vaccines.

[Research culture: where should change start?](#)

In this opinion piece, Wellcome invited people from across the research community to share their ideas for change.

[Black graduates 'shut out' of academic science and technology careers](#)

Royal Society report shows white students twice as likely as black students to achieve top Stem degrees.

Digital technologies

[UK joins European network to advance high performance computing](#)

UK Research and Innovation has announced two leading supercomputing facilities in the UK have combined to create a national computing competence centre as part of a Europe-wide network.

International news

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

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

[Genetic make-up of destructive crop pest unravelled](#)

Researchers have decoded the genetic make-up of whitefly species that spread plant diseases and damage crops, raising hopes for tackling the devastating pest, according to SciDev.Net.

[Groundwater depletion in India 'threatens food security'](#)

SciDev.Net how a new study shows that groundwater depletion may cause a 20 per cent reduction in India's crops by 2025.

[How Does That Song Go? This Bird Couldn't Say](#)

New generations of a critically endangered species of songbird are failing to learn the tunes they need for courtship. It could lead to extinction, says The New York Times.

[Both African elephant species are now endangered, one critically](#)

For the first time, a major conservation body has recognised the savanna elephant and forest elephant as two separate species—and they're in dire straits, reports National Geographic.

People

[Vaccine engagement starts...working with the media](#)

British Society for Immunology (BSI) member, Dr Zania Stamataki discusses her experience of working with the media and the benefits of public engagement for career progression in this case study for BSI's new 'Vaccine engagement starts...' series.

Opportunities

#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.

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

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.

Closes: 31 July 2021

Consultations

Draft update to the UK National Implementation Plan for the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs)

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, on behalf of the Devolved Administrations, is consulting on a draft update to the National Implementation Plan for POPs. The update covers 'new POPs' and also sets out the information available for these substances and plans to monitor and eliminate them in the future.

Closes: 14 May 2021

Draft policy statement on environmental principles

The Government is consulting on the draft policy statement on environmental principles which sets out how 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

[Senedd Elections Science Hustings 2021](#)

8 April 2021

17:00 – 18:30 BST

The Royal Society of Biology is jointly organising a special Science Hustings in advance of the elections to the Welsh Senedd in May.

[HUBS Annual Meeting 2021](#)

12 – 13 April 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).

[Policy Lates: Bridging the Gap - Supporting students through educational transition](#)

24 April 2021

18:30 – 20:30 BST

A free, online Policy Lates event exploring challenges and opportunities for students as they transition between stages of education.

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...

[These birds flock in mesmerising swarms of thousands—but why is still a mystery](#)

Defending against predators can't completely explain why European starlings create such incredible patterns in the sky, writes National Geographic.

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