

Concerned Scientists' Weekly News Bulletin

[March 8, 2021]



*Our weekly bulletin collects and digests news of the past week.
Contributions welcome.*

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NEWS ITEMS AND ARTICLES

*The Hill: [Interior Department reverses Trump policy that it says improperly restricted science](#)
The Interior Department reversed a Trump policy that the Biden administration says “improperly restricted” the department's use of science and data. In a new order, acting Interior Secretary Scott de la Vega revoked the previous order and directed a review of all actions taken under it.*

*Guardian: [Biden's Energy Department revives loan program to boost clean technology](#)
The Biden Administration hopes to restart a federal loan program for the development of clean energy technologies that helped create the US's first utility-scale solar and wind farms under the Obama Administration. When in use a decade ago, the program also helped Tesla, but it lost \$400m in taxpayer money when solar company Solyndra failed after receiving federal money. The only major loan provided by the program under the Trump Administration was to a nuclear power station in Georgia.*

*New York Times: [Oil giants prepare to put carbon back in the ground](#)
The multibillion-dollar project could be a breakthrough for a technology known as carbon capture and storage, a concept that has been around for at least a quarter-century to reduce the climate-damaging emissions from factories.*

*Reuters: [Biden administration seeks to restore migratory bird protections](#)
In a statement, the Interior Department said it rescinded the 2017 legal opinion issued under then-President Donald Trump that reinterpreted a century-old statute, allowing companies that accidentally kill migratory birds to escape prosecution. The memo was part of Trump's broad effort to loosen regulatory restrictions on business, particularly energy development.*

Guardian: [Land could be worth more left to nature than when farmed, study finds](#)

The economic benefits of protecting nature-rich sites such as wetlands and woodlands outweigh the profit that could be made from using the land for resource extraction, according to the largest study yet to look at the value of protecting nature at specific locations.

Guardian: [California's wildfire smoke could be more harmful than vehicle emissions, study says](#)

A new study that examined 14 years of hospital admissions data found a 10% increase in hospitalizations due to respiratory issues correlated with spikes in air pollution from wildfires. These hospitalizations are expected to increase, as six of the largest wildfires on record occurred in 2020. Another study that analyzed blood samples from children found that one day of increased air pollution could cause subsequent immune and cardiovascular problems.

American Institute of Physics: [AI advocates seek vast expansion of new national initiative](#)

A 750-page report released by the National Security Commission on Artificial Intelligence calls for Congress to increase R&D into AI to \$32 billion by 2026, increase the Department of Defense's annual budget for AI by \$6.5 billion by 2025, and create a new agency called the National Technology Foundation. These recommended actions go far beyond the National AI Initiative Act passed on January 1.

Nature: [Multitude of coronavirus variants found in the US — but the threat is unclear](#)

Compared to many other countries, the United States had been lagging in genome sequencing of potential coronavirus variants until recently, when new variants have begun to be identified across the country, from California to Louisiana to New York. The sequencing data is important for identifying new mutations and assessing the impact they may have. Yet it is currently being done by individual laboratories and cities as opposed to a centralized, national effort.

New York Times: [Some scientists question W.H.O. inquiry into the coronavirus pandemic's origins](#)

A small group of scientists, called the Paris group, have written an open letter calling for WHO to investigate the possibility that the Coronavirus Pandemic was the result of an accidental laboratory leak. WHO officials have stated it is "extremely unlikely" but not impossible that the virus originated from a lab as opposed to human-wildlife contact, but the Paris group argues that given the nature of their first inquiry in China, WHO could not adequately assess the possibility.

New York Times: [The virus spread where restaurants re-opened or mask mandates were absent](#)

CDC researchers released a study showing that mask-mandates were associated with lower COVID-19 infection and death rates while counties that loosened or removed restrictions, specifically allowing the opening of outdoor and indoor dining, saw an increase in daily infections 6 weeks later and an increase in death rates about two months later. The National Restaurant Association criticized the study for not controlling for other businesses or regulation changes that could contribute to the rise in infections and objected that there was no distinction made between outdoor and indoor dining or whether restaurants followed distancing and ventilation recommendations.

Guardian: [Great apes given Covid vaccines after outbreak at San Diego zoo](#)

Four orangutans and five bonobos have been given an experimental COVID vaccine following the infection of 8 members of a gorilla troop, likely transmitted from an asymptomatic zookeeper. The vaccine was developed by Zoetis, a US veterinary pharmaceutical company, specifically for use in animals. If approved, the vaccine could also be given to minks, dogs, and cats.

REGIONAL NEWS

IndyStar: [Banning natural gas would cut emissions. But lawmakers don't want that happening in Indiana.](#)

House Bill 1191 would limit Hoosier city and town governments from banning any specific type of fuel source for appliances and heating homes. The language is neutral, but it has been made clear in hearings that the issue is about protecting natural gas.

IndyStar: [U.S. has rejoined the Paris accord. Hoosiers, start your engines.](#)

The United States has now rejoined the Paris climate accord. This powerful change of climate course both advances global solutions and opens Midwest opportunities. The electric vehicles and renewable energy equipment that are made in the Midwest create jobs, save money, and reduce pollution both locally and globally.

Courthouse News Service: [Twelve states sue Biden over Green New Deal emissions cost](#)

Missouri has led 12 states, including Indiana, in challenging the Biden administration Green New Deal-inspired decision to calculate the social costs of emitting greenhouse gases. Describing the separation of powers as a “fundamental bulwark of liberty,” the lawsuit argues that it falls on Congress to regulate the social costs associated with greenhouse gases, not the executive branch.

OPINION AND ANALYSIS

The Atlantic: [The differences between the vaccines matter](#)

Some vaccines are more effective than others at preventing illness; some cause fewer adverse reactions; some are more convenient; some were made using more familiar methods and technologies. But the claim that the vaccines have proved perfectly and equally effective at preventing hospitalization and death isn't correct.

Nature: [COVID is amplifying the inadequacy of research-evaluation processes](#)

The pandemic has showcased the stunning gains that science and scientists can achieve for society. At the same time, it has thrust some of academic research's uncomfortable truths back into the spotlight—notably the continuing, and now seemingly widening, gender gap and the potential neglect of a generation of researchers.

Grist.org: [The legacy of an EJ titan](#)

Remembering the Black activist Cecil Corbin—Mark remained steadfast in the struggle to eliminate toxic pollution, address systemic racism, and implement equitable climate and energy policies. He scored a key victory, too, in helping pass landmark climate legislation that would not only commit his home state of New York to net-zero emissions by 2050 but require at least 35 percent of state energy and climate spending go to pollution-burdened communities.

The Conversation: [“Biodegradable” plastic will soon be banned in Australia. That’s a big win for the environment](#)

Australia’s first National Plastics Plan will fight plastic on various fronts, such as banning plastic on beaches, ending polystyrene packaging for takeaway containers, and phasing in microplastic filters in washing machines. It will also phase out biodegradable plastic, a problematic and unregulated category.

TAKE ACTION AND RESOURCES FOR ACTIVISTS

NRDC: [Demand safe and sufficient drinking water for all](#)

Access to safe, affordable drinking water is a basic human right, one that is especially important during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Yet nearly 130 million people in the United States—disproportionately from low-income areas and communities of color—receive their drinking water from water systems that violate the federal Safe Drinking Water Act, with issues stemming from underinvestment of infrastructure, poor oversight, pollution, and discrimination. Consuming polluted water can increase people’s risks of cancer, infertility, developmental delays, and more. Urge the Biden administration to ensure safe drinking water for all.

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