

World News Roundup



People watch the launch of model rockets near St Peter and St Paul Cathedral during a celebration of the 58th anniversary of Russia's Yuri Gagarin's first manned flight into space, in St Petersburg, Russia on April 14. (AP)

Technology

Climate threats grow

Tech eases farming 'drudgery' and risk

OXFORD, England, April 15, (RTRS): In India, farmers growing crops for seed company Mahyco get a text message after they deliver their harvest, noting its weight and how much was usable – followed quickly by another text saying their money is in the bank.

That reliable flow of cash through their accounts means when a farmer goes to ask for credit, the bank is much more likely to give them a loan, said Usha Barwale Zehr, director and chief technology officer for the Maharashtra-based seed firm.

As climate change makes farming far tougher and more young people reject it as a career, technological innovations to make the work more secure and appealing can help, agricultural specialists told the Skoll World Forum on Social Entrepreneurship in Oxford this week.

Giving small-scale farmers access to the right-sized farm machinery, for instance, can help reduce backbreaking labour and keep more people on the land, Zehr said.

"Farming is hard work, drudgery," she said. "No young person wants to stay in farming if they have other options. They would rather go to the city and do something else."

But mobile phone apps that connect farmers with other rural entrepreneurs who invest in wheat-combines for hire, for instance, can give farmers access to easier harvests at a low cost – and provide an income for the harvester as well.

"We've seen a lot of excitement from farmers for these digital applications," Zehr said.

Struggling

In Ghana, farmers struggling with worsening pest and plant-disease problems related to climate change, as well as wilder weather, can now access a call centre staffed by young agronomists, said Willy Foote, CEO of Root Capital.

In a region without enough on-the-ground agricultural advisers, the farmers use mobile phones to get fast advice on what to do when termites invade a field, for instance, said Foote, whose non-profit invests in such innovations.

"Agronomists can go out on a motorcycle (to visit) if needed, but 80 percent of the issues can be addressed right there," Foote said.

Technology also is making it easier for African nations to judge what size harvest their farmers will bring in, without the need for slow and costly field visits, said Agnes Kalibata, president of the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA).

Countries such as Rwanda used to send out analysts each season to look at 30 percent of the country's farms – each with an average size of a third of a hectare – to plan ahead and try to ensure an adequate food supply, said Kalibata, a former Rwandan agriculture minister.

Now, AGRA has partnered with Atlas AI, a Silicon Valley artificial intelligence firm, to create satellite-based "predictive analytics" for harvests in 11 African countries, including Rwanda, saving time and effort, she said.

As climate change makes harvests more unpredictable, "we need to give countries a sense of what is going to happen, how to plan", she added.

AGRA also has worked with African countries to end the popular but volatile system of providing free internationally sourced seed to farmers, and instead to support the development of private local seed distribution systems, Kalibata said.



Foote



In this May 6, 2015 photo, researchers attempt artificial insemination on a female Yangtze giant softshell turtle at a zoo in Suzhou in eastern China's Jiangsu province. The only known female member of one of the world's rarest turtle species has died at a zoo in southern China, officials said on April 14. (AP)



Fienberg



Ige

Discovery

China busts smuggling gang: Chinese authorities seized 7.48 tonnes of smuggled ivory tusks last month, the biggest haul in recent years, as Beijing steps up a campaign against illegal wildlife trafficking.

The seizures came during an operation against an international criminal gang "that has long been specialising in smuggling ivory," the customs administration said on Monday.

China, the world's largest importer and end user of elephant tusks, banned ivory sales in the country in 2017.

Demand for ivory from Asian countries such as China and Vietnam, where it is turned into jewels and ornaments, has led to a surge in poaching across Africa.

Since January, China has seized 8.48 tonnes of ivory and ivory products and more than 500 tonnes of endangered species, the customs administration said.

The ivory tusks are part of a flurry of seizures – from rhino horns to pangolin scales – in Hong Kong, Singapore and Vietnam in recent months. (RTRS)

Black hole name little fuzzy: The newly pictured supermassive black hole is a beast with no name, at least not an official one. And what happens next could be cosmically confusing.

The team of astronomers who created the image of the black hole called it M87(asterisk). (The asterisk is silent.) A language professor has given it a name from a Hawaiian chant – Powehi – meaning "the adorned fathomless dark creation." And the international group in charge of handing out astronomical names? It has never named a black hole.

Environment

'New environ pact could face September vote'

EPA chief defends big energy projects

WASHINGTON, April 15, (RTRS): The US Environmental Protection Agency will unveil a proposal to speed state-level permitting decisions for energy infrastructure projects soon, the agency's chief told Reuters on Thursday, blasting states that have blocked coal terminals and gas pipelines on environmental grounds.

President Donald Trump is seeking to boost domestic fossil fuels production over the objections of Democrats and environmentalists concerned about pollution and climate change. On Wednesday he issued a pair of executive orders targeting the power of states to delay energy projects.

"We started working on it in advance, so we hope to have something out soon," EPA Administrator Andrew Wheeler said in an interview.

He was unable to provide a precise timeline.

Based on Trump's orders, Wheeler's EPA has been tasked with clarifying a section of the US Clean Water Act that has allowed states like New York and Washington to delay projects in recent years.

New York has used the section to delay pipelines that would bring natural gas to New England, for example, and Washington state has stopped coal export terminals that would open the Asian market for struggling coal companies in Wyoming and other landlocked western states.

"They are trying to make international environmental policy," Wheeler said of Washington state, whose govern-

nor, Democrat Jay Inslee, is running for president on a climate change-focused platform. "They're trying to dictate to the world how much coal is used."

Wheeler said New York, which amid strong public pressure denied a clean water act permit for construction of a natural gas pipeline to New England, is forcing that region "to use Russian-produced natural gas."

"We are importing Russian natural gas which is not produced in an environmentally conscious manner. If the states that are blocking the pipelines were truly concerned about the environment, they would look to where the natural gas would be coming from ... I think it's very short-sighted," he said.

Wheeler said the EPA would not prevent a state from vetoing a project, but would clarify the parameters they should be able to consider, and the length of time they have to do so.

He also said that California is playing politics in its fight with the EPA to preserve its more stringent vehicle emission standards as the national standard.

Wheeler said he believes climate change is a problem, but that it had been overblown by former president Barack Obama's administration – at the expense of other bigger issues like water quality.

"Yes, climate is an issue and we are working to address it, but I think water is a bigger issue," he said.

Wheeler dismissed the findings of a report released earlier this week by

EPA scientists in the journal Nature Climate Change that detailed the scale and urgency of climate change.

He said while he encouraged EPA scientists to carry out and publish research, he stressed the recent paper "did not reflect EPA policy."

Environmental groups say the EPA's replacement of an Obama-era rule limiting carbon emissions from power plants would likely lead to increased emissions by allowing older, more polluting coal plants to operate longer.

Asked whether the replacement – the Affordable Clean Energy rule, which gives states responsibility for regulating emissions – is stringent enough, Wheeler said it adheres to the parameters of federal law.

Also:

UNITED NATIONS: A new, ambitious environmental treaty is expected to be ready for a vote when the United Nations' annual summit begins in September, the president of the UN General Assembly said on Friday.

Maria Fernanda Espinosa, who is nominally in charge of the 193-member body, said negotiations underway could soon produce a definitive text for the **Global Pact** for the Environment, which is supposed to plug holes left by prior treaties.

As president of the General Assembly, Espinosa represents all member states, a role that differs from that of the UN Secretary-General, **Antonio Guterres,** who acts as the chief of the UN itself.

The black hole in question is about 53 million light years away in the center of a galaxy called Messier 87, or M87 for short. On Wednesday, scientists revealed a picture

they took of it using eight radio telescopes, the first time humans had actually seen one of the dense celestial objects that suck up everything around them, even light.



In this June 30, 2015 file photo, an endangered cassowary roams in the Daintree National Forest, Australia. On April 12, 2019, a cassowary, a large, flightless bird native to Australia and New Guinea, killed its owner when it attacked him after he fell on his property near Gainesville, Fla. Cassowaries are similar to emus and stand up to 6 feet (1.8 meters) tall and weigh up to 130 pounds (59 kilograms). (AP)

The International Astronomical Union usually takes care of names, but only for stuff inside our solar system and stars outside it. It doesn't have a committee set up to handle other objects, like black holes, galaxies or nebulas.

The last time there was a similar situation, poor Pluto somehow got demoted to a dwarf planet, leading to public outcry, said Williams College astronomer Jay Pasachoff, a star-naming committee member.

Technically, our own galaxy – the Milky Way – has never been officially named by the IAU, said **Rick Fienberg,** an astronomer and press officer for the American Astronomical Society. He said, "that's just a term that came down through history."

"Virtually every object in the sky has more than one designation," Fienberg said. "The constellations have their official IAU sanctioned names but in other cultures, they have other names."

When it comes to the black hole we saw this week, University of Hawaii-Hilo Hawaiian professor Larry Kimura stepped up even before the photo was unveiled.

Powehi (pronounced poh-veh-hee) is the black hole's Hawaiian name, not its official name, explained Jessica Dempsey, who helped capture the black hole image as deputy director of the James Clerk Maxwell Telescope on Mauna Kea, Hawaii's tallest mountain. Hawaii Gov. **David Ige** proclaimed April 10 as Powehi day, she said. (AP)