

News in brief



TENS OF THOUSANDS OF SCIENTISTS JOIN THE FIGHT AGAINST CORONAVIRUS

As they shutter their labs indefinitely, tens of thousands of researchers are volunteering to help fight the pandemic in any way they can. Working around the clock, scientists at the Broad Institute of MIT and Harvard in Cambridge, Massachusetts, can run about 2,000 COVID-19 tests per day (pictured). In places where testing is still scarce – which is to say, in much of the world – their actions can provide crucial relief to public-health systems stretched to their limits.

Universities are organizing, researchers are banding together, and efforts to get volunteers and equipment where they are most needed are in progress around the globe. “All of the people who are now suddenly not working have skills that can be applied,” says Michael Monaghan, a molecular ecologist at the Leibniz Institute of Freshwater Ecology and Inland Fisheries in Berlin.

The Association of American Universities, a consortium of 65 leading US research institutions based in Washington DC, has used Twitter to urge its community members to donate spare personal protective equipment to hospitals and medical facilities. Many have heeded the call.

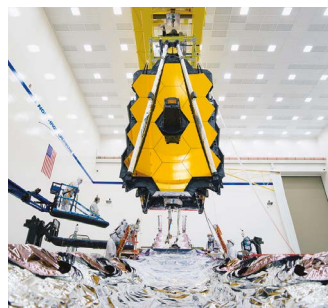
BUSH-FIRE SMOKE LINKED TO HUNDREDS OF AUSTRALIA DEATHS

Researchers estimate that smoke pollution probably killed more than 400 people from November to February during the unprecedented bush fires across southeast Australia. Thirty-three people were killed in incidents directly related to the fires.

Air-pollution researcher Fay Johnston at the University of Tasmania in Hobart led a team that collected data on the average number of emergency-department admissions, hospitalizations and deaths on any given day. The researchers mapped detailed data on air-pollution levels from 1 October to 10 February and modelled how these would have increased the emergency admissions.

Their model suggests that there could have been around 417 additional deaths and 1,305 emergency-department admissions for asthma attacks over the period of the fires. An extra 3,151 people could also have been admitted to hospital for heart and respiratory problems.

The results are reported in *The Medical Journal of Australia*, and are the first published estimate of the scale of the medical impact of the bush-fire smoke (N. Borchers Arriagada *et al. Med. J. Aust.* <http://doi.org/dqrg>; 2020). Johnston calculates that the haze affected around 80% of Australia’s 25 million people, some for many weeks at a time.



OUTBREAK COULD DELAY SPACE TELESCOPE LAUNCH

The world’s most expensive telescope is the latest project to fall foul of the coronavirus pandemic. The James Webb Space Telescope (pictured) was supposed to launch in March 2021, but faces possible delays because NASA halted most work on the US\$8.8-billion telescope on 20 March. The telescope had been going through final assembly and tests in Southern California – a region now locked down to stop people spreading the coronavirus.

“Delaying launch is absolutely the right thing to do, if it will keep the people working on the mission safe,” says Zachory Berta-Thompson, an exoplanet researcher at the University of Colorado Boulder. “We astronomers can continue to be patient.”

The hold-up adds to a long list of woes for the Webb telescope, which has experienced years of delays and cost overruns.

NASA is pushing ahead with work on its Mars rover, slated to blast off between 17 July and 5 August. If it misses the launch window, the mission must wait two years to try again. They are doing “heroes’ work” in keeping the mission on track for a July launch, said Thomas Zurbuchen, NASA’s head of science.

The European Space Agency has already delayed a Mars rover it planned to launch in July, in part because of the outbreak.

UNIVERSITY PAYS MILLIONS IN SEXUAL-HARASSMENT SETTLEMENT

The University of Rochester in New York has agreed to pay a US\$9.4-million settlement to researchers who sued the institution over how it handled allegations of sexual harassment against a cognitive scientist. The settlement, announced on 27 March, brings to a close one of the most prominent harassment cases at a US university.

The nine researchers sued the institution in December 2017 over its response to allegations that Florian Jaeger, a professor in the department of brain and cognitive sciences, had sexually harassed students.

The researchers – who include former faculty members and a former student who collectively filed complaints against Jaeger on behalf of other students – argued that the university retaliated against them for reporting Jaeger, harming their careers.

In 2018, the university commissioned an investigation into the allegations against Jaeger, which cleared him of the most serious complaints. Jaeger, who continues to deny the substance of the allegations made against him, was not a party in the suit and is still employed at the university.

University spokesperson Sara Miller confirmed the amount of the settlement. “No party to the settlement admitted liability or fault,” she said. “The university is committed to providing a safe and inclusive environment for its students, faculty, and staff.”

All nine plaintiffs have left the University of Rochester.