



The Round-Up: April 5th 2007

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[Billions at risk from wheat super-blight](#)

An infection is coming, and almost no one has heard about it. This infection isn't going to give you flu, or TB. In fact, it isn't interested in you at all. It is after the wheat plants that feed more people than any other single food source on the planet. And because of cutbacks in international research, we aren't prepared. The famines that were banished by the advent of disease-resistant crops in the Green Revolution of the 1960s could return, Borlaug told New Scientist.

The disease is Ug99, a virulent strain of black stem rust fungus (*Puccinia graminis*), discovered in Uganda in 1999. Since the Green Revolution, farmers everywhere have grown wheat varieties that resist stem rust, but Ug99 has evolved to take advantage of those varieties, and almost no wheat crops anywhere are resistant to it....

...What's more, Ug99 will find agriculture has changed to its liking in the decades stem rust has been away. "Forty years ago most wheat wasn't irrigated and heavily fertilised," says Borlaug. Now, thanks to the Green Revolution he helped bring about, it is. That means modern wheat fields are a damper, denser thicket of stems, where dew can linger till noon - just right for fungus.

Another worry is that travel has exploded in the past 40 years. There have now been several documented cases of travellers carrying rust spores on their clothing. Some fear Ug99 will hitchhike as much as it flies - and its spread need not be innocent. New Scientist has learned that the US Department of Homeland Security met in March to discuss the possibility that someone could transport Ug99 deliberately.

[Forests no longer allies in climate-change fight](#)

Fearing the effects of forest fires and tree-destroying insect infestations, the federal government has decided against using Canada's forests in the calculations for totalling up the country's greenhouse-gas emissions.

Instead of forests being used as a credit to offset other emissions, the government is now afraid that including forests in the formula could drive up Canada's climate-change burden.

Government scientists made the call after learning of the damage that could come to forests from 2008 to 2012 and realizing the forests could become another source of

emissions, pushing Canada even further from its Kyoto targets.

In addition to destroying trees, which take carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere, insect infestations increase the threat of wildfires. For example, the mountain pine beetle, a current threat in Western Canada, burrows into a tree and prevents it from drawing water, killing it and turning it to kindling.

[Winter Arctic sea ice near record low](#)

Sea ice extent, or the area of ocean that is covered by at least 15 percent ice, was 5.7 million square miles in March, the Colorado-based National Sea and Ice Data Center said today. March usually marks the end of winter in the Arctic, a period when sea ice recovers from the summertime minimum.

This March's ice level represented a slight recovery from the record low during the same month last year when the ice extent was 5.6 million square miles. But low sea ice levels this winter - the world's warmest on record, according to the U.S. government - are part of a trend toward less ice.

[Dire predictions may not go far enough](#)

Dire predictions expected later this week from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change may in fact be too conservative, according to new Arctic sea ice data. A U.S. study on northern sea ice found that not only did 2006 have the second-lowest amount of ice on record, but also that the ice is retreating faster than the panel's climate models have predicted.

"The model forecast may be underestimating what we could expect in the future years," Walt Meier, a climatologist with the National Snow and Ice Data Centre in Boulder, Colo., said Wednesday.

Meier's group tracks the annual maximum extent of the Arctic sea ice by the end of the northern winter, which is defined as March 31.

[Expect Canada's winter to melt: climate report](#)

Canada's claim to be The Great White North may be in jeopardy, says a report to be released Friday by the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

In the second of a series of four reports it is releasing this year, the IPCC paints a picture of a Canada that will be, by and large, increasingly milder and wetter this century.

The report, a copy of which was obtained by CTV News, assesses the impacts of climate change that is already happening and provides an analysis of how governments around the world, including Canada, are preparing to adapt their citizens to the new environmental reality.

[NASA Finds Arctic Replenished Very Little Thick Sea Ice in 2005](#)

A new NASA study has found that in 2005 the Arctic replaced very little of the thick sea ice it normally loses and replenishes each year. Replenishment of this thick, perennial sea ice each year is essential to the maintenance and stability of the Arctic summer ice cover.

The findings complement a NASA study released in fall 2006 that found a 14-percent drop in this perennial ice between 2004 and 2005. The lack of replenishment suggests that the decline may continue in the near future.

Perennial ice coverage fluctuates seasonally for two reasons: summer melting and the transport of ice out of the Arctic. When perennial ice, which is three or more meters (10 or more feet) thick, is lost in these ways, new, thinner, first-year seasonal ice typically replaces it. Some of this seasonal ice melts in the following summer, and some is thick enough to survive and replenish the perennial ice cover.

"Recent studies indicate Arctic perennial ice is declining seven to 10 percent each decade," explained Ron Kwok of NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory, Pasadena, Calif. "Our study gives the first reliable estimates of how perennial ice replenishment varies each year at the end of summer. The amount of first-year ice that survives the summer directly influences how thick the ice cover will be at the start of the next melt season."

[Kyoto goals more strict than we've been told, experts say](#)

Canada faces far greater obstacles in reaching its Kyoto Protocol commitments than the public has been told because its targets are much more stringent than commonly understood, according to experts on the treaty.

It's well known by Kyoto insiders that the target all federal parties talk about -- roughly a 26-per-cent cut in carbon emissions by 2012 -- is just the start. It would leave the country far behind its legal requirements.

The single most important part of the protocol is a twist that's seldom mentioned in public: Canada's target is a five-year average, not a goal to reach by the end of the Kyoto period.

[Federal eco-cash raises profile of east-west power grid](#)

Manitoba's intention to build an east-west power grid to sell hydroelectric power to Ontario has received a major boost from the federal government.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper announced Tuesday Ontario would use a part of its \$586-million share of the \$1.5-billion Canada ecoTrust fund "to begin work on an east-west electrical transmission interconnect with Manitoba, which will allow for the flow of new, clean hydroelectric power to the Ontario market.

"This will assist the Ontario government as it moves forward in phasing out the province's remaining coal-fired generating stations, a goal which, once fully realized, will result in the reduction of millions of tonnes of carbon dioxide emissions.

[Ontario calls on feds to back Churchill megaproject](#)

Ontario's energy minister says he hopes squabbling between Ottawa and the Newfoundland and Labrador government will not derail a hydroelectric megaproject in Labrador.

Dwight Duncan, who visited Newfoundland and Labrador government officials Monday, said the planned Lower Churchill project fits perfectly with Ontario's future energy demands.

[Feds approve green funds for province](#)

After some uncertainty, Ottawa announced Friday that it had reached an agreement for the transfer of \$23 million, this province's share of a \$1.5 billion clean air and climate change program.

The announcement was made by federal Environment Minister John Baird and his provincial counterpart, Clyde Jackman.

"With this funding, Newfoundland and Labrador will be better able to address its specific geographic and environmental challenges, and contribute to a healthier Canada," Baird stated.

According to a news release, the funds will be used to help implement elements of the province's climate change action plan, which was released in 2005

In addition, the funding will indirectly contribute to the province's energy plan, which will be released in the coming weeks, said Jackman.

[The Current, Apr. 3rd, Part II: Climate Change and Food Security](#)

So could Canada experience another great drought or will other effects of climate change prevail? Well, ever since the first alarms about global warming were sounded, there has been the scientific promise of at least one silver, or green, lining with more carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, plants would thrive and with rising temperatures, there'd be longer growing seasons in more northern climes.

Indeed, later this week, the UN report is expected to point to Canada as one of the agricultural winners under a new climate regime as the global wheat belt moves northward. But farmers in Saskatchewan are already facing hardship today brought on by drought and unpredictable weather patterns. And some experts see this pattern worsening delivering a hard blow to the breadbasket.

[Gore to speak in Regina on green issues](#)

In a hastily-called press conference Wednesday, Calvert announced that former U.S.

vice-president Al Gore had accepted his invitation to speak in Regina on April 23, the day after Earth Day.

Calvert said that watching Gore's Academy Award-winning documentary on climate change, *An Inconvenient Truth*, was a "significant moment" in his personal understanding of climate change and its impact on Saskatchewan.

The fact that the province has one of the worst records on greenhouse gas emissions in Canada is all the more reason why Gore, who will receive a \$125,000 fee, should come to Saskatchewan to raise public awareness, Calvert told reporters.

[Angry Sask. premier slams Harper over equalization](#)

Calvert called Harper's budget-day decision to cap Saskatchewan's non-renewable resource revenue - rather than remove it altogether from the equalization formula as the Conservatives promised during the election campaign - a case of giving Saskatchewan's resources money to Quebec for tax cuts and to buy votes.

"How are you supposed to build a nation?" Calvert asked. "This federal government has Balkanized the country through its own political desire to win seats more than any other government in history."

[Harper-Williams feud creates doubt in some candidates](#)

Mr. Williams and other provinces are upset because the federal government has slapped a cap on equalization payments and has not lived up to a pledge to remove non-renewable-resource revenues from the formula that calculates the amount a province receives from the program.

Mr. Harper said the Premier's assertions are wrong.

"Premier Williams has said that the Atlantic Accord has somehow been cut or capped," he said. "This is absolutely false and transfers to the government of Newfoundland and Labrador will continue to grow this year and in the years to come."

The fallout from the feud has started to pit federal and provincial party members against each other.

[Hebron will get done: premier](#)

It's been a year since negotiations to reach an agreement on development of the Hebron-Ben Nevis megaproject fell off the rails.

But Premier Danny Williams remains optimistic that a deal will be reached between the province and a consortium of oil companies.

Williams said Tuesday officials with his government and Newfoundland and Labrador Hydro are in discussions with partners in the project "all the time."

He wouldn't go into details of those discussions.

Williams said the companies - ExxonMobil, Chevron Canada Resources, Petro-Canada and Norsk Hydro Canada Oil and Gas Inc. - will realize the value of the project and will be back to the negotiating table.

"If we're naive enough to think they're going to walk away from us for 15 to 20 years, then I think we're making a mistake," Williams said.

[Pipe dreams](#)

Remember Gisborne Lake? Or, more to the point, remember the idea of exporting bulk water from this province to other parts of the world that need water? At the time, the whole idea seemed far-fetched - loading fresh water into tankers and shipping it off to buyers willing to swallow the costs - but don't fool yourself.

Ideas are only far-fetched until the dollars make sense.

And when it comes to water, all sorts of bizarre ideas seem to be making sense.

[Oilsands boom vulnerable to derailment](#)

"Where's the consultation, the shared vision?" he asked, recalling how his group, Alberta and Ottawa collaborated in a 1990s national oilsands task force to invent the royalty and tax structure that supports the development lineup.

"Ten years ago we used to phone each other and discuss things," he said. (Now) no one in Ottawa asked Alberta industry before Finance Minister Jim Flaherty cut a \$300-million annual oilsands tax break in the March 20 federal budget as obsolete, Anderson added.

The move did not by itself kill any projects. But industry leaders warned it worsened existing problems that were already eroding investment support, problems such as rising construction costs, Alberta's forthcoming royalty review and the still-unknown federal plans for controls on greenhouse-gas emissions.

[Showdown with Big Oil](#)

"The outcome of this case will affect the overall rights of landowners of the province of Alberta," the federation's resolution warned. The federation's mission statement blasted the fact that surface rights have become "a dominant bone of contention" in rural Alberta.

And complained bitterly of the "massive transfer of wealth" from the country to the cities - fingering "the government and industry" as the culprits. The federation was set up to "mount a defence against the takings and trespasses of Big Government and Big Oil" and to defend "our shared cultural values and property rights."

[Enbridge pushing plan to pipe oil to Texas](#)

Enbridge Inc. is pushing ahead with a plan to move Canadian oil to Texas, preparing to present a detailed plan to potential customers by the end of June.

"Getting oil to the Gulf Coast is very important for Canadian producers," Patrick Daniel, chief executive officer of Enbridge, said in an interview Wednesday.

Enbridge plans to hold what is called an open season for the Texas pipeline in the next several months, a typical process in the industry where potential shippers are invited to make commitments to move crude oil.

Mr. Daniel said Enbridge has not yet made a decision on what Texas pipeline proposal it plans to put forth. One possibility, which Enbridge unveiled last summer, would be a direct link from Alberta that could cost \$3.6-billion (U.S.) and move 400,000 barrels a day.

[Organizations make election plans to oppose Security and Prosperity Partnership](#)

Canadian civil society groups concerned about the Security and Prosperity Partnership (SPP) between Canada, the U.S. and Mexico are holding a press conference today outlining key problems with the current corporate push for so-called "deeper integration."

The Council of Canadians, the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), the Parkland Institute and the Canadian Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR-CAN) are concerned that the SPP will have harmful effects on democracy, job security, natural resources and the environment, and minority rights in Canada and throughout North America.

In opposition to the SPP, the groups are demanding that the Canadian government:

- Abolish the North American Competitiveness Council, the corporate advisory body driving the SPP process
- Develop a concrete plan to protect the environment, energy and water in Canada
- Ensure that civil liberties and rights are not compromised under the pretext of the U.S.-led war on terror
- Make job security and higher standards of living for workers in Canada a priority
- Submit the SPP to legislative review and meaningful consultation with the public

[Trade, Investment and Labour Mobility Agreement \(TILMA\)](#)

We thought we'd seen them all - NAFTA, FTAA, WTO, GATS - different acronyms, but the same system of unfair trade. But there's a new one to learn and to fight: TILMA. In April 2006, without public consultation or legislative debate, the premiers of Alberta and British Columbia signed an unprecedented inter-provincial free trade deal called the Trade, Investment and Labour Mobility Agreement.

This deal allows corporations and individuals to sue provincial governments for any provincial or municipal government measure they feel "restricts or impairs" their investment (i.e. their profits). Under TILMA, even measures designed to protect the

environment and public health are vulnerable to attack from corporate lawsuits with compensation penalties as high as \$5-million.

Not surprisingly, the United States is interested in signing on to TILMA, and talks are under way to bring U.S. states, and more Canadian provinces, into its reach. This would lead to massive deregulation in Canada, as we harmonize policies with the U.S., which makes TILMA an urgent issue of deep integration.

[Warning: Recession ahead](#)

Although the world economy continues to grow, the economic health of the United States is at risk. There are several potential problems. In this essay we examine three of them, and conclude a recession is highly probable. If America does experience a recession, or even a period of declining GDP, the resulting economic malaise will spread to all of its trading partners.

That's one of the benefits of globalization.

[The Coming Credit Crunch](#)

We believe a credit crunch is underway. It started with the housing slowdown, which resulted in deteriorating real estate prices (collateral values), is now fed by adjustable rate mortgages resetting higher, that make it difficult for many homeowners to make payments on time. Without rising values, refinancing isn't an option, resale isn't an option (folks owe more than they can get, net of real estate sales commissions and taxes), and so they are forced to hand lenders the keys. This has resulted in losses for subprime lenders, who generated loans to marginal borrowers based upon unsubstantiated incomes, and a belief that collateral values would continue rising. Now on the radar screen, politicians have put pressure upon regulators such as the Federal Reserve to account for how this could've happened. Regulators "on the defensive" always generates an overreaction. This overreaction means more frequent and more intense bank examinations, tighter standards imposed upon lenders, subjective classification of loans as worse than they are in reality. If a loan is a few months delinquent, while before that meant "keep an eye on the borrower," now it means the lender must set aside earnings into a reserve for possible loan losses. This kills bank earnings. This intimidates lenders into not lending. This creates a credit crunch, which lowers money supply, which causes/worsens a recession. That is where we are headed fast. It is like a black hole, sucking the life out of the economy. Eventually this loan scrutiny affects all loans, not just residential real estate. In effect, we end up with a bank examiner generated recession. They get tough too late, at the wrong time.

[Subprime Mortgage Bond Sales Plunge in First Quarter](#)

Sales of bonds backed by subprime mortgages are tumbling as investors and bankers, concerned about rising delinquency rates, pull back from what had been one of Wall Street's fastest growing businesses.

About \$79.3 billion of securities backed mainly by loans to people with poor credit or

high amounts of debt were issued this year, down 37 percent from \$125 billion in the same period last year, according to a March 30 Citigroup Inc. report.

Packaging mortgages into bonds was the fastest-growing part of the debt market since 1995.

[For Mortgage Market, It Is Time for Prime](#)

Jay Brinkmann, economist for the Mortgage Bankers Association, says subprime problems may "bleed over" into prime.

As evidence of this he cites "a general increase in credit spreads across the board." When the supply of money for loans falls, credit spreads - the difference between what lenders pay in interest versus what they get from borrowers - tend to rise, making all loans more expensive, including prime.

What a difference a year makes.

In 2004, 2005 and through early 2006, housing was still hot and home loans of all kinds were easy to come by. Investors were pumping money into the mortgage markets and they were willing to buy riskier loans in return for high yields; sometimes, it now seems clear, the risks were over the top.

"Investors signaled that they willing to buy some stupid loans, so mortgage brokers went out and wrote some stupid loans," says Randy Johnson, president of Independence Mortgage Co. and author of "How to Save Thousands of Dollars on your Mortgage."

[Rather than carpool, drivers adapt to gridlock: analyst](#)

Drivers are getting more cozy in their fully equipped cars and becoming accustomed to gridlock, which one traffic analyst said is leading to the demise of carpooling.

"[You have] entertainment systems, you have language lessons, you have cellphones," said Pravin Varaiya, an engineering professor at the University of California at Berkeley. "It's your little space and you have some free time, if you can call it that."

[Dale Allen Pfeiffer: Connecting the dots between energy depletion and the "War on Terror"](#)

Now it seems that other journalists are beginning to back up what I have said with their own words. There is one vital omission, however. None of them have mentioned energy depletion. They seem to present all of this as simply greed on the part of US oil interests. Certainly, US oil interests are greedy, and they do not much care who or what they destroy to reach their ambitions. But, seen in the light of energy resources, most of the fronts in the War on Terror are truly acts of desperation. The invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq have destabilized both countries and made it much more difficult and dangerous for any business venture in those countries, or even in the region. And attempts to depose Presidente Chavez in Venezuela have completely backfired. No, such desperate moves only make sense when we take into account the coming oil peak and

the ensuing era of energy depletion.

[Cities set limits on serving food to homeless people](#)

Cities are cracking down on charities that feed the homeless, adopting rules that restrict food giveaways to certain locations, require charities to get permits or limit the number of free meals they can provide.

Orlando, Dallas, Las Vegas and Wilmington, N.C., began enforcing such laws last year. Some are being challenged.

Last November, a federal judge blocked the Las Vegas law banning food giveaways to the poor in city parks. In Dallas, two ministries are suing, arguing that the law violates religious freedom.

"Going after the volunteers is new," says Michael Stoops of the National Coalition for the Homeless. "They think that by not feeding people, it will make the homeless people leave."

[Warmer oceans 'make seafood toxic to humans'](#)

Experts estimate that up to 50 000 people worldwide suffer ciguatera poisoning each year, with more than 90 percent of cases unreported. Scientists say the risks are getting worse, because of damage that pollution and global warming are inflicting on the coral reefs where many fish species feed.

Dozens of popular fish types, including grouper and barracuda, live near reefs. They accumulate the toxic chemical in their bodies from eating smaller fish that graze on the poisonous algae. When oceans are warmed by the greenhouse effect and fouled by toxic runoff, coral reefs are damaged and poison algae thrives, scientists say.

[What's happening to the bees?](#)

Beekeeper James Doan first began finding empty hives last fall. Entire bee colonies seemed to have up and vanished, leaving their honey behind. Noting the unusually wet fall in Hamlin, N.Y., he blamed the weather. Unable to forage in the rain, the bees probably starved, he reasoned.

But when deserted hives began appearing daily, "we knew it was something different," he says. Now, at the beginning of the 2007 pollination season, more than half of his 4,300 hives are gone. "I'm just about ready to give up," says Mr. Doan from his honeybee wintering site in Ft. Meade, Fla. "I'm not sure I can survive."

The cause of the die-offs has yet to be determined. Its effect on the food supply may be significant. Longer-term, it may also force a rethinking of some agricultural practices including our heavy reliance on human-managed bees for pollination.

Scientists call it "colony collapse disorder" (CCD). First reported in Florida last fall, the problem has since spread to 24 states. Commercial beekeepers are reporting losses of

between 50 and 90 percent, an unprecedented amount even for an industry accustomed to die-offs.

Many worry that what's shaping up to be a honeybee catastrophe will disrupt the food supply. While staple crops like wheat and corn are pollinated by wind, some 90 cultivated flowering crops – from almonds and apples to cranberries and watermelons – rely heavily on honeybees trucked in for pollination. Honeybees pollinate every third bite of food ingested by Americans, says a Cornell study. Bees help generate some \$14 billion in produce.

[Billionaires buying up great swaths of one of the last wilderness areas](#)

Patagonia, a swath of mountains, rivers and grasslands in Argentina and Chile at the southern tip of South America, is one of the world's last, great, untouched frontiers.

"You can buy great expanses of beautiful land in Patagonia that you can't get anywhere else in the world," says Ward Lay, the son of a founder of PepsiCo and its snack company, Frito-Lay. Lay owns 200,000 acres, or 81,000 hectares, in Patagonia.

Multimillionaires and billionaires have purchased enormous tracts of land in Patagonia, which is more than twice the size of Germany, for as little as \$4 an acre. Some of the wealthy buyers say they are doing their part to save the planet.

Local lawmakers and Mapuche Indians, among the original inhabitants of Patagonia, say that these foreigners are making many natural wonders off-limits to them and stifling development of resources in a poor region.



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