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INNOVATIONS

Of cornballs and speech translation

» In an Indiana cornfield, scientists are searching for corn cobs with a genetic mutation that causes them to curl into bushy spheres. They're using the mutated cobs to study *ramosa1*—a gene that usually keeps corn growing in straight, easy-to-eat ears. As explained in the July 24 edition of *Nature*, re-

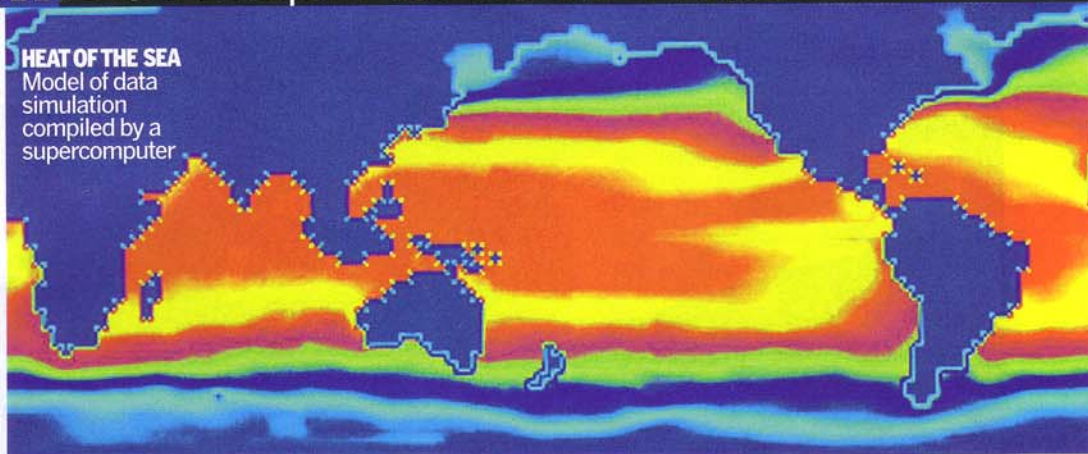


searchers at Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory in New York say the *ramosa1* gene could offer clues to improving other crops such as rice and sorghum.

» Engineers at the University of Southern California are perfecting translation technology designed to let Persian-speaking patients talk to English-speaking doctors. Unlike past voice-recognition packages—which often guessed incorrectly at what the speaker was trying to say—USC's program is interactive. After users speak, the system asks them to select the best of several messages expressing what they said. They choose one, and the system translates it. The technology could be ready for hospitals in two years.

—By Bremen Leak

HEAT OF THE SEA
Model of data simulation compiled by a supercomputer



SOFTWARE

HELPING COMPUTERS TALK ABOUT THE WEATHER

IF WEATHER-forecasting computers around the world could compare notes as easily as people chitchat about the oppressive summer heat, meteorologists would have a much better way to forecast disasters such as hurricanes—or coming Ice Ages. But the dozens of supercomputers that simulate the earth's climate were built at different universities and government agencies, many with custom code, so it's next to impossible to get them to talk to one another.

On July 20, NASA researchers announced that they're testing a software platform designed to solve those problems. The product allows researchers to switch components in and out of different simulations and to test and create more precise global models of the weather in a snap. Researchers believe the improved collaboration will not only aid short-term forecasting but also will boost their understanding of issues such as global warming.

—Burt Helm

GENETICS

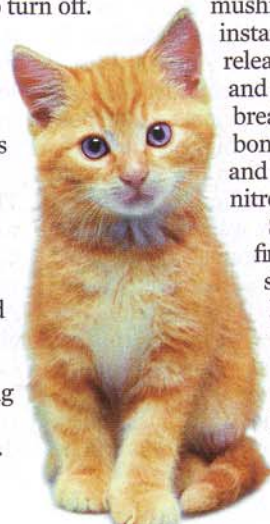
WHY KITTY IGNORES THE CANDY DISH

CAT LOVERS HAVE always known that their finicky friends don't like sweets. Now they know why. In July researchers from the Monell Chemical Senses Center in Philadelphia and the Waltham Center for Pet Nutrition in Leicestershire, Britain, discovered a genetic characteristic that prevents cats from tasting sugary ingredients.

The feline discovery could have implications for human health. In both cats and

people, a pair of genes produces two proteins that allow us to recognize and respond to sweets. But in cats, part of a gene is missing, causing one of the protein spigots to turn off.

Studying the same system in people might reveal whether genetic mutations determine who will have a sweet tooth. That could help in the fight against obesity. For example, food makers may be able to chop calories by making trace amounts of sugar taste better.



REFINING

HOW TO SQUEEZE MORE FUEL FROM CRUDE

AFTER A BARREL of crude oil is processed at a refinery, some tarlike residue is always left. Now, after five years of research, SulphCo in Sparks, Nev., has found a way to convert most of that gunk into a source of low-sulfur diesel and jet engine fuel.

SulphCo had set out to remove sulfur, but executives realized that the technology also could reduce nitrogen in crude oil. The process squeezes an extra 7 or so gallons of fuel from every barrel, potentially cutting U.S. oil imports by 20% if widely used. It works by hammering molecules of crude oil with ultrasound. These sound waves create millions of tiny bubbles that quickly

mushroom in size, then instantly implode—releasing immense heat and pressure. That breaks the chemical bonds between carbon and both sulfur and nitrogen.

SulphCo says its first system has been shipped to South Korea. A second will be processing 5,000 barrels a day in the U.S. by yearend.

—By Otis Port

(TOP TO BOTTOM) NASA; STOCKBYTE/PICTUREQUEST