

Portuguese firefighters battle deadly wildfires

Portugal has requested help from Spain and France as wildfires cut a swathe of destruction across central and northern areas of the country

Lisbon's Interior Ministry has asked for air support in the form of four firefighting Canadair planes. Around 1,300 emergency personnel are on the ground battling more than 275 blazes thought to have been caused by soaring summer temperatures.

Houses have been destroyed leaving their owners distraught. One

woman said her husband could not speak because he was so upset, "When we saw that everything around had been burnt, we just stayed inside the house and thought we would die," she said. The island of Madeira has also been struggling against fires — at the weekend a hospital had to be evacuated outside Funchal, the island's cap-

ital. According to Portugal's Institute for the Conservation of Nature and Forests (ICNF), nearly 31,000 hectares of forestland have gone up in smoke this year. Wildfires are continuing to affect Portugal with at least eight still active in northern and central areas of the country.

The Portuguese meteorological of-

fice has announced that 22 regions are in maximum alert for fires. Extremely high temperatures have been blamed for the fires. More than 1,000 firefighters and 250 vehicles are tackling the flames. Portugal requested help from Spain and France as the wildfires cut a swathe of destruction across the country.



Firefighters try to extinguish a forest fire in Tondela

UK lenders in new insurance mis-selling scandal

Britain's banks are to be hit with another big bill for mis-selling financial products to their customers. This time it involves credit card insurance policies.

Thirteen banks and credit card issuers, along with the insurance company CPP, have agreed a deal with regulators under which they will pay out the equivalent of 1.5 billion Euros to seven million customers.

The Financial Conduct Authority said, "The involvement of the banks and credit card issuers reflects the fact that they introduced customers to CPP's products and so must share responsibility for putting things right."

The FCA said customers were given misleading and unclear information about the policies and ended up buying protection they did not need.

This is the latest in a string of mis-selling scandals in the UK that has resulted in huge compensation payments.

Banks are still paying out compensation for mis-selling payment protection insurance (PPI), which so far has totalled well over 10 billion Pounds (11.67 billion Euros).

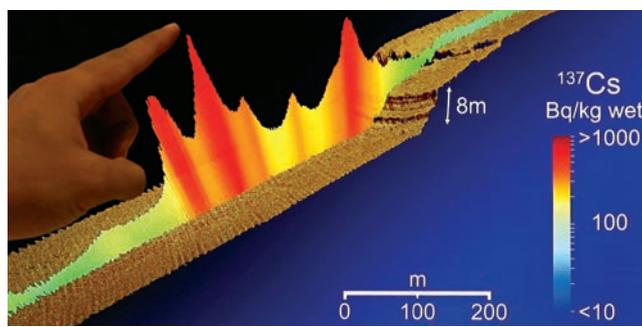
The banks and credit card issuers involved in this problem are Bank of Scotland, Barclays, Canada Square Operations, Capital One, Clydesdale Bank, Home Retail Group Insurance Services, HSBC, MBNA, Morgan Stanley, Nationwide, Santander, RBS and Tesco Personal Finance.

Tepco 'careless' in Fukushima water leak

The operator of Japan's wrecked Fukushima nuclear plant was careless in monitoring tanks storing dangerously radioactive water

Tokyo Electric Power Co. also failed to keep records of inspections of the tanks, Nuclear Regulation Authority (NRA) Commissioner Toyoshi Fuketa said after a visit to the nearby Fukushima Daiichi plant. Fuketa visited the plant last Friday after NRA Chairman Shunichi Tanaka said he was concerned more of the hastily built giant containers would fail.

"Fundamentally, for a facility holding that kind of radioactive water, they did not take action that foresaw the risks of



Graph showing radioactivity level off the shore

possible leaks," Mr. Fuketa said. "On top of that, and this is an impression I had before my visit, I can't help but say that the inspections were careless."

Japan's nuclear crisis recently escalated to its worst level since a massive earthquake and tsunami crippled the plant more than two years ago, with

Tokyo Electric saying a tank holding highly contaminated water leaked 300 tonnes of radioactive fluid.

It was the fifth and most serious breach of the same type of tank, as the crisis goes from bad to worse, prompting neighbouring China to express shock at the continuing leaks. A tsunami crashed into the plant, north of Tokyo, on March 11th, 2011, causing fuel-rod meltdowns at three reactors, radioactive contamination of air, sea and food and triggering the evacuation of 160,000 people.

It was the world's worst nuclear accident since Chernobyl in 1986. There are 350 tanks in place at Fukushima holding radioactive water used to cool the fuel rods. The plant is fast running out of space.

Tokyo Electric said that new spots of high radiation had been found near the storage tanks, raising fear of fresh leaks. Tokyo Electric, which has long had problems with documentation, did not keep proper records of its tank inspections and therefore missed problems, Mr. Fuketa said.

Is Elon Musk's Hyperloop just a pipe dream?

Much like the pun in the headline, the bright idea of transporting people using some kind of vacuum-like tube is neither new nor imaginative

There was Robert Goddard, considered the 'father of modern rocket propulsion,' who claimed in 1909 that his vacuum system could suck passengers from Boston to New York at 1,200mph.

And then there were Soviet plans for an amphibious monorail — mooted in 1934 — in which two long pods would start their journey attached to a metal track before flying off the end and slipping into the water like a two-fingered Kit Kat dropped into some tea.

More recently, the Evacuated Tube Transport Technologies (ET3) system, patented in 1999, has visions of a 4,000mph trip from Beijing to New York. They say they have attracted many investors, but as yet there is no working prototype.

So ever since inventor and entrepreneur Elon Musk hit the world's me-

dia with his plans for the Hyperloop, a healthy dose of scepticism has been in the air.

"This is by no means a new idea," says Rod Muttram, formerly of Bombardier Transportation and Railtrack. "It has been previously suggested as a possible transatlantic transport system. The only novel feature I see is the proposal to put the tubes above existing roads."

So what chance does Mr Musk have if so many others have failed?

"I don't see anything that violates fundamental laws of physics," writes John Hansman, a Professor of aeronautics and astronautics at MIT.

He says the question is not 'Could you do it?' but 'Could you do it in a way that makes sense from an energy-efficiency standpoint and makes sense from an economic standpoint?'

It is that economic side of Mr



Inventor Elon Musk hits the world with his plans for the Hyperloop

Musk's plans that have come under scrutiny since he announced his plans on Monday.

Indeed, unlike some of the arguably more out-there entrepreneurs of yesteryear, most are in agreement that the science of the Hyperloop, although not yet demonstrated, at least makes a good deal of sense.

Mr. Musk claims his plans would come in well under the cost of the high-speed rail infrastructure being built around the world, including in the

UK. But others are far from convinced.

"From personal experience of high-vacuum systems," says Mr. Muttram, 'maintaining a high vacuum and the quality of alignment needed over such a long distance in an earthquake area would need some innovative engineering, and the infrastructure cost-quoted looked optimistic to me.'

His concerns are shared by Pat Hanlon, a senior lecturer in transport economics at the University of Birmingham.

"Throughout history, almost all major transport innovations turn out to cost much more to develop than originally anticipated," he says. "Only a few weeks ago we learned that the estimate for building the entire [UK high speed rail network] has increased from £30 billion to £43 billion. But the classic example of a cost overrun was that of Concorde, for which the total development cost turned out to be some multiple of the original estimate."

Even before investment in erecting the high-speed link could be considered, attention must be paid to research costs, says another expert.

"The technical problems involved in converting ideas like these into a commercial ground transportation system fully engineered to present-day safety standards are immense," says Alan Wickens, visiting Professor at Loughborough University and a former director of research at British Rail.

"Musk's estimate of the cost of the system at £3.9bn is also extremely optimistic, even if all the technology was off-the-shelf."