Agricultural research

UK council forced to trim sails

THE British Agricultural Research Council (ARC) is pressing ahead with a radical restructuring of its support for research, apparently unabashed by its rough treatment last year by the Advisory Board for the Research Councils. The council, soon to be known as the Agricultural and Food Research Council, is increasing support for food research at the expense of most other areas and plans to increase by 50 per cent its support for research undertaken in universities. University research will in future take up 15 per cent of ARC's share of the science budget.

When the advisory board's "Forward Look" was published a year ago, ARC's secretary, Dr Ralph Riley, protested at the proposed decline in ARC's share of the science budget. But ARC is now planning for next year on the assumption that its real income will be even less than the advisory board recommended, mainly because of a Treasury decision to restrict the money available for pay increases to 3 per cent rather than the expected 5 per cent.

Although ARC will not formally know until the end of the year how much cash it will have during 1984-85, it is now assuming that the worst will happen. It expects to receive only £45.9 million from the science budget, significantly less than in the current year, and is reconciled to less commissioned research from the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food than had been hoped for.

ARC's internal allocation of funds to its institutes will not be finally decided until a strategic plan is completed in December. Meanwhile, however, most ARC institutes have been asked to submit proposals for large savings, including redundancies where necessary. It has already been decided that 13 members of staff will lose their jobs at Rothamsted Experimental Station.

Most of the planned reductions are in animal disease, fruit and arable crop programmes. In percentage terms, the largest cuts will be made at the Institute for Research on Animal Diseases near Newbury and at the plant physiology Letcombe Laboratory near Oxford. It seems likely that there will have to be major changes in the work of some smaller institutes such as the Letcombe Laboratory and the nearby Weed Research Organization.

Earlier this year, ARC estimated that if the planned cuts went ahead, 600 posts would be lost over three years but that roughly half of their holders might be redeployed. Scientific staff would account for two-thirds of the redundancies.

The only institutes that will receive a large cash increase next year are the Food Research Institute at Norwich and the Meat Research Institute near Bristol. The shift towards food research was recommended in a report last year by the

Advisory Council on Applied Research and Development, and ARC has now obligingly formally created a Food Division.

Some policy makers feel that, with food surpluses accumulating to an embarrassing degree in Europe, there is a greater need for research on how to use food than how to produce it. Others, such as Mr J. Fryer, director of the Weed Research Organization, say this is a short-sighted view, and that there will be more rather than less need for mainstream agricultural research during the rest of the century.

Fryer is particularly concerned that

political pressures may reduce Britain's ability to carry out research relevant to the needs of developing countries. He is worried that ARC might be forced to make decisions whose effects will span decades in response to short-term considerations of expediency.

In ARC's draft annual report for 1982-83, Dr Riley says "... it is important to hold the course that has been so effective ... namely that of providing a wide range of scientific information from which an array of practical technology may be drawn".

Many institute directors are keeping their fingers crossed that Dr Riley will have the clout to persuade the council's paymasters of just that principle.

Tim Beardsley

Animal welfare

Berkeley campus in dog-house

Washington

THE University of California at Berkeley, which for years has been criticized for inadequate care of laboratory animals, is now facing opposition from animal rights groups to its plans to construct improved laboratory facilities.

At an unusual meeting with the regents of the university last week, three animal rights groups (Fund for Animals, Californians for Responsible Research and a group calling itself Buddhists Concerned for Animals) pressed their case, repeating now-familiar charges of substandard animal care at Berkeley. Animal rights activists earlier this year succeeded in persuading the state legislature not to approve construction funds for a new life sciences building until the university demonstrates that conditions have improved.

The legislature is specifically requiring Berkeley to meet the strict standards set down by the American Association for the Accreditation of Laboratory Animal Care (AAALAC). A request for construction funds is expected from the university next year.

Berkeley's chancellor, Ira Heyman, last week responded to the animal rights groups' charges by saying "we cannot meet our goals for completely up-to-date and effective animal care without new buildings". The major biological laboratories at Berkeley are old, one of them more than 50 years old. Heyman said that "it is impractical or impossible" to bring these older buildings up to modern standards. And he accused the groups of attempting to portray Berkeley in the worst possible light by presenting specific past problems as typical of the campus as a whole.

Mark Giannelli, science adviser to the Fund for Animals, said he does not oppose construction of the new laboratory (although the two other groups that spoke before the regents last week are preparing a lawsuit against the university, demanding

that an environmental impact statement on the new buildings be filed) but added that the "primary problem" in animal care at Berkeley is one of "attitude", not facilities.

Inspection reports of the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) (which enforces the Animal Welfare Act), AAALAC, and several internal Berkeley committees tend to support this view. An AAALAC inspection requested by Berkeley in 1982 cited nine general deficiencies that would have to be corrected before full accreditation could be granted. Of these, only one — inadequate ventilation and temperature controls — involved facilities directly. A faculty task force concluded last February that it was not at all clear "whether a new facility will solve all the animal problems of the Berkeley campus".

The USDA inspection reports provide more details in a litany of complaints of housekeeping and sanitation deficiencies. Clogged drains, feed mixed with excrement, protruding sheet metal edges and wire in cages, insect and wild rodent infestations and a lack of trained employees are cited in report after report. USDA inspectors have filed several alleged violations of the Animal Welfare Act with USDA's office of the general counsel. Sources close to the USDA investigation of these charges say that the agency will seek civil penalties against Berkeley.

The Berkeley campus has recently begun to correct many long-standing problems. Half a million dollars has been allocated since July 1983 for major renovations, mainly improving temperature control and installing new cage washing facilities. Two additional campus veterinarians have been hired, and a training course for animal caretakers set up. And, in response to the legislature's requirement, Berkeley has invited AAALAC to reinspect the campus "in a few months", the chancellor said.

Stephen Budiansky