

1675, will almost certainly remain, and could return to its original site next to the Thames in south London, where its former building is now a museum.

The decision to close the Cambridge site was announced last week by the science minister, John Battle, and was taken on the advice of PPARC (see *Nature* 387, 646; 1997). Pounds says the council could not afford to maintain two institutions essentially performing the same function — providing technical support to Britain's telescopes in the Canary Islands and Hawaii.

PPARC's predecessor, the Science and Engineering Research Council, had wanted to merge the observatories at Edinburgh 15 years ago. But this was considered too politically sensitive at the time, says Pounds. A later panel voted to move the RGO to Cambridge in 1990 on the strength of possible collaboration between the RGO and the University of Cambridge's highly regarded astronomy facilities.

In 1995 a review panel on UK millimetre, optical and infrared astronomy again decided to merge the centres. That review was chaired by James Hough, head of the department of physical sciences at the University of Hertfordshire. But its plans were put on hold when the previous Conservative government launched its 'prior options' initiative inviting competitive bids from the private sector to manage UK research facilities.

A new panel was convened after the May general election, this time chaired by Brian Eyre, deputy chairman of AEA Technology plc. This panel unanimously came to essentially the same conclusion. Eyre says there was little to choose between the two sites. Edinburgh was chosen because it offered the right mix of skills for PPARC programmes.

But RGO staff strongly disagree. David Carter, who runs the RGO's telescope design consultancy jointly with Liverpool John Moores University, says Edinburgh does not have the same expertise in telescope design as

Cambridge. He fears these skills will be lost overseas. He doubts whether staff will want to relocate to Edinburgh given the recent move to Cambridge from the RGO's former home in East Sussex.

Andy Lawrence, professor of astronomy at the University of Edinburgh and a member of the management board at the Royal Observatory in Edinburgh, agrees that Cambridge possesses superior design skills. But he says that PPARC chose Edinburgh because its superior instrumentation skills will be more useful now that the United Kingdom's last big telescope project that needed design input, the twin 8-metre Gemini, is nearing completion.

The RGO left its Greenwich site 50 years ago, moving to East Sussex after the Second World War to escape the streetlights and smog of London, then to Cambridge. It won the race to fix longitude at sea, established the meridian, and set Greenwich Mean Time as the international standard. **Ehsan Masood**

'Political interference skewed scientific advice on fish stocks'

[MONTREAL] Three Canadian scientists claim that political and bureaucratic interference in fisheries science has compromised the government's efforts to sustain stocks of Atlantic cod and Pacific salmon.

Jeffrey A. Hutchings of Dalhousie University's biology department, Carl Walters of the University of British Columbia's fisheries centre, and Richard L. Haedrich of the biology department at Memorial University of Newfoundland claim that the administrative framework linking science with management suppresses scientific uncertainty and obscures scientists' differences of opinion.

They propose replacing it with a politically independent organization of fisheries scientists. They also suggest that all scientific information about fish stocks should be released to the public at the same time as it is presented to the fisheries department, so that the public can evaluate management decisions based on that information.

But the scientists' ideas have been dismissed by officials from the fisheries department. The department's deputy director, William Rowat, claims that the comments are based on innuendo and misrepresentation, and are part of a vendetta against the department, its scientists and its managers.

The scientists' arguments appeared last month in the *Canadian Journal of Fisheries and Aquatic Sciences*, published by the National Research Council of Canada, under the title "Is scientific inquiry incompatible with government information control?"

To back up their claims that a political 'spin' is being placed on scientific results, the authors refer to several incidents in which they allege that government fisheries reports excluded scientific information contrary to



the official line. They claim that the government, which denies that overfishing is the primary cause of present stock collapses, omitted references to conclusions that overfishing had caused stock decline in a 1995 report for Newfoundland groundfish.

Scientific information was also selectively excluded in the 1995 Stock Status Report on Gulf of St Lawrence groundfish, say the scientists. The original draft of the document said that seal predation or environmental conditions were unlikely to be responsible for cod mortality trends from 1985–87. But this statement was removed from the published version, contrary to scientific advice, the authors claim.

They also allege that scientists have been ordered not to discuss politically sensitive matters — such as overfishing — in public, "irrespective of the scientific basis, and publication status, of the scientist's concerns".

One scientist who admitted in an interview with a journalist in 1995 that east coast fish stocks had collapsed from overfishing

and "had nothing to do with the environment, nothing to do with seals" — as some fishermen had claimed — was officially reprimanded for not giving a balanced perspective and for disagreeing with the Newfoundland Stock Status Report. Yet "these comments were consistent with much of the research that had been ... published in peer-reviewed journals", the authors say.

The authors claim that inappropriate government influence on fisheries science also extended to testimony given by scientists in the courts. They quote one scientist who described his confusion when told how to behave as an expert witness in a case involving salmon affected by a dam built by the aluminium smelting company Alcan.

The scientist wrote in 1986 that at the meeting the director-general in the fisheries department had instructed staff to support the minister's position, while adhering to the scientific advice. "I find it impossible to do both," he wrote.

William Doubleday, director-general, science, in the fisheries department, has criticized the comments as "not the usual scientific debate" but "an attack on an organization and the people that were working in it".

Doubleday says the article contains "factual errors, misrepresentations, and very selective quotes". He says the department is preparing a rebuttal, but that the authors have also been invited to participate in an open forum to debate the management of science later this summer.

But the former editor of the journal, David Cook, who gave up the post last month, defended publication of the article by suggesting it would lead to "broad exposure" and "candid debate". **David Spurgeon**