Wellcome Trust loses battle to expand its genome campus

[LONDON] The UK government has rejected a proposed £100 million (US$160 million) extension to the Wellcome Trust's Genome Campus in Hinxton, Cambridgeshire.

The proposal was seen as an important test of how the British government would balance its commitment to biotechnology 'clusters' with its promises to protect the rural environment.

The Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) has been emphasizing the importance of such clusters, as well as stronger links between universities and industry, since the launch of its policy paper on competitiveness at the end of last year (see *Nature* **396,** 714; 1998).

The decision followed an extended — and bitter — battle between the Wellcome Trust and local planning authorities over the development of the site, which is home to the Sanger Centre for gene sequencing, the European Bioinformatics Institute and the Human Genome Mapping Project Resource Centre. The trust wants space to commercialize research from these laboratories. It says that locating biotech companies alongside researchers will help to generate ideas and make it easier for scientists who go into business to maintain links with their former laboratories.

But the proposals met with stiff opposition from the local authority and residents of nearby villages over the scale of the development, which was said to be a threat to the rural environment. The local authority argued that space for 'spin-out' companies already exists on the district's many science parks.

Despite promising a statement on the planning decision, the Wellcome Trust is refusing to comment until its governors meet on 8 September. But the news will come as a profound disappointment to the trust, which has repeatedly affirmed its belief in the proposal. In April, Mike Dexter, its director, complained about the length of time they had been kept waiting and said the government could aid biomedical research by ensuring that planning decisions were "taken in the national interest".

The trust must now consider whether to apply for a smaller extension, of just over half the 40,000 square metres originally requested, which would be likely to win planning permission but would not provide enough space for the expansion of biotechnology companies already on the site.

David Hussell, planning director of the local South Cambridgeshire District Council, said of the decision: "This is good news for the planning system, which must strike the right balance between prosperity and environmental concerns."

The government also approved two smaller biotech developments in the Cambridge area, including an expansion of the Babraham Institute. Hussell contrasted the institute's approach with that of the trust as being "flexible" and hoped that the trust would "adopt a similar approach" in future negotiations.

The DTI rather optimistically described the planning decisions, which were taken by the Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions, as a "positive boost to the Cambridge biotechnology cluster". The rejection of the Hinxton Hall proposal, albeit with the option for a smaller site, is seen as a snub for the DTI, whose science minister only this month published a report on promoting biotechnology clusters as part of a long-term strategy to promote their growth.

Successful clusters, said the report, "require concerted action across a range of policy areas, from supporting the science base to encouraging the flow of venture capital into companies and having urban planning policies that allow clusters to grow". The report notes that planning restrictions are a significant barrier to the growth of UK biotechnology and recommends that special planning zones be set up where clusters may develop.

Natasha Loder

Shoddy buildings cost lives in Turkish quake

[MUNICH] **Seismologists and earthquake engineers say that the failure to implement building standards intended to cope with the risk of earthquakes contributed to the appalling death toll in last week's earthquake at Izmit in Turkey.**

Earthquake engineers in Turkey and abroad say that many of the thousands of victims of the 17 August earthquake would have survived if new buildings had complied with local building standards.

The epicentre of the earthquake, which registered 7.5 on the Richter scale, was at the industrial port city of Izmit, 80 kilometres east of Istanbul. During the earthquake, parts of Turkey, where the Arabian and Eurasian tectonic plates meet, slid several metres to the west along the North Anatolian fault.

The risk of earthquakes along the fault, which stretches 1,300 kilometres from the Caucasus through northern Turkey to the Mediterranean sea, is extremely high. In 1939, an earthquake at Erzincan killed 45,000, and 1943, 1944, 1957 and 1967 all saw major earthquakes.

But the densely populated region was unprepared. Thousands died in new apartment buildings built on unsuitable ground and made of low-quality concrete without appropriate reinforcement.

Nicholas Ambraseys, an earthquake engineer at Imperial College in London, says that the transition from the traditional building materials of timber and brick to concrete has led to a serious lack of workmanship in Turkey. As a result, recently constructed apartment buildings collapsed, while older bridges and buildings, as well as most of the historical minarets, survived.

AP

Old buildings, like this mosque in Golcuk, were still standing as new ones collapsed around them.

Seismologists say that better scientific knowledge would not have lessened the scale of the disaster. Turkish Earth scientists and engineers are highly regarded and have good contacts with geologists and disaster researchers in Germany, Japan and the United States.

"We have done the most that we can," says Mustafa Erdik, head of earthquake engineering at the Bosphorus University in Istanbul. But "the existing building codes are simply not being applied".

The Turkish Ministry of Public Works and Settlement tried to improve compliance two years ago, but the legislation was resisted by the construction industry, and has not been passed by parliament.

Seismologists and engineers from several countries have rushed to Turkey to provide scientific support in monitoring aftershocks and assessing the stability of buildings and water quality. They expect a series of strong aftershocks in the region over the next few weeks.

Quirin Schiermeier