

Recession hits plans for science growth in New Zealand

[HOBART] Researchers in New Zealand are feeling the effects of their country's economic recession. The halt to a projected increase in funding for basic research means that the success rate of applications to the Marsden Fund, the main source of such support, has remained at about last year's level of eight per cent in the 1998 round.

In the fourth year since it was launched, the fund — named after Sir Ernest Marsden, founding secretary of the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research, which the government closed in 1991 — is giving NZ\$6.9 million (US\$3.4 million) to 63 new projects out of 757 applications.

In the 1996 round, 13 per cent of grant applications were successful. But the rate fell to about eight per cent last year when the government required that the grants cover the full costs of the research, with no funding coming from other sources.

The annual allocation for the fund has remained constant this year at NZ\$22 million (US\$10.8 million), with no allowance for inflation. About one-third was allocated to new projects, most going to support continuing projects from previous rounds.

The government had previously stated that support for the Marsden Fund was projected to grow to 10 per cent of the value of the Public Good Science Fund, which has received NZ\$317 million this year. But this goal was dropped in the May 1998 budget (see *Nature* 393, 198; 1998).

Projects from seven broad disciplinary areas were selected by a panel of experts. The life sciences was the most successful category overall, with 19 grants. Universities dominate the successful institutions, with 49 grants; seven are shared among various Crown Research Institutes, and the remaining seven among private research institutes and individuals.

Research already supported by the fund includes the production of the first Bose-Einstein condensate by physicists at the University of Otago last August, and the elucidation of fish navigation by researchers at the University of Auckland (M. M. Walker *et al.* *Nature* 390, 371–376; 1997).

George Petersen, president of the Academy of the Royal Society of New Zealand, described the Marsden Fund as “a key component” in overall science funding in the country, and expressed his “deep disappointment” at its curtailment.

With the country's economy falling into recession, many commentators consider it unlikely that the government will reverse the downward drift in its support of research in the near future.

Peter Pockley

Intel co-founder funds new centre for biodiversity . . .

[WASHINGTON] Computer tycoon Gordon Moore last week pledged \$35 million to set up a Center for Applied Biodiversity Science in Washington, the largest private gift ever made to biodiversity conservation.

Moore, co-founder of Intel Corporation, and his wife Betty will give the money to Conservation International (CI), a nonprofit organization that works in some two dozen countries. Gustavo Fonseca, CI's vice president for Brazil programmes, will be executive director and Harvard biologist E. O. Wilson will chair its advisory council.

“It's not going to be a grant-making facility of the typical kind,” Fonseca says. The centre will bring together experts in science, economics and policy to identify emerging threats to biodiversity around the world. It will create fellowships, hold conferences and form partnerships with existing organizations. “I think we can really leverage a lot of what's being done,” he says.

An example is the \$20 million network of eight biological field stations approved by Brazil's National Research Council, scheduled to begin operating this month. The new centre may participate in data collection at

these sites, similar to the Long-Term Ecological Research (LTER) sites sponsored by the US National Science Foundation. Centre-funded researchers could help develop standardized research protocols for field stations in other countries, says Fonseca.

One advantage the new centre will have over other funding organizations like the World Bank is its ability to disperse money quickly and efficiently, he says.

Among threats to biodiversity, says Fonseca, is “predatory” logging in developing areas like the Amazon basin, where international timber companies are cutting down large expanses of pristine forest. As well as assessing damage, the new centre will help determine policies to mitigate the threat.

Moore chairs the executive committee of Conservation International's board of directors. In announcing his gift last week in San Francisco, he cited CI's “unique ability to make use of available information to implement actions” that slow the loss of biodiversity, and said the new centre will assure that “the world's best minds” are on the job. Fonseca expects the new centre to be staffed and operating within weeks.

Tony Reichhardt

. . . and gives Cambridge a science library



Something for everyone: the library donated by Moore (right) will also house Hawking's archive.

[LONDON] Intel's Gordon Moore (see story above) is to finance the building of a £7.5 million (US\$12.5 million) physical sciences and technology library at the University of Cambridge. It will bring together a number of libraries scattered around the city.

The new library, next to the university's centre for mathematical sciences, will include the papers and archive of Stephen Hawking, which the physicist has promised to donate. Hawking is an enthusiastic user of Intel technology: among other applications he reaches the Internet via a wireless GSM (Global System for Mobile communications) connection and a notebook specially

modified for his text-to-voice synthesis software by Intel engineers.

According to the university, the library “represents a new intellectual focus for Cambridge science and technology”. It has been designed to provide “cutting edge electronic retrieval services”, supported by hard copies of journals where available.

Peter Fox, the university librarian, says the circular building — similar to the library designed by Thomas Jefferson at the University of Virginia — has been made “as flexible as possible”. Shelves can be taken out and terminals added as demand for access to electronic data increases. □