

UK research funds

Council's blunder leaves earth sciences stranded

AN administrative miscalculation means that the UK Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) and the scientific community that it supports are facing a severe shortage of funds for new research next year as a result of errors in forecasting within the council's university support section. At a meeting last week, the council decided to scrape together sufficient money so that at least some new projects can be started in 1984. Others already approved by the council's committees will have to wait until the beginning of 1985 unless further funds can be found in the meantime.

NERC spends just over £4 million a year on university research in the aquatic, atmospheric and solid earth sciences, while most of its £87 million budget is spent in its own research institutes, currently under pressure as a result of cuts in spending on "commissioned research" from government departments. The shortage of cash for new research in universities became clear only in October. Research grants usually last four or five years so that, of the total cost, typically 20 per cent would fall due in the first year and 30 per cent in each of the two subsequent years. Thus in any year, most of the £4 million spent on university research is already committed.

NERC seems now to have realized that awards made in previous years have led to a current over-commitment of about 20 per cent, so that the £800,000 or so that would normally have been used to begin new projects is not available. Those present at the October grant committee meetings were told that the projects that they were in the process of approving could not be started until 1 January 1985. (The committees meet in October and March and typically approve 140 or so grants a year — about one-third of the total applications.)

The exact cause of the problem is unclear. One component (although not a major one) is that the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals (CVCP) reached a pay settlement earlier this year that had a considerable impact on NERC's finances. A research grant covers employment of research staff, purchase of equipment and travel and subsistence. For most grants, the research staff represent the major cost burden, and they usually occupy the lower rungs of university pay scales. In April this year, CVCP agreed to a pay settlement that amounted to about 4.6 per cent, but because the lowest rung of the relevant pay scale was abolished, the cost of the cheapest research assistant increased by about 13 per cent.

Such a factor can hardly explain a 20 per

cent over-commitment, however. When asked to explain the origin of the problem, the council's chairman, Sir Hermann Bondi, said that "the system that was being operated by the council's university support section to forecast the effect of inflation proved inadequate". When the older grants that are still current were begun (1980), inflation was running at 15.4 per cent, but it has since fallen steeply and is now running at about 5 per cent. In these circumstances, errors in inflation forecasting would be expected to be in the council's favour, so that the conclusion that somebody within the council has been incompetent seems hard to escape.

At a meeting last week, the council decided that just over £100,000 should be redirected to permit the start of the "most urgent" grants in 1984. Thus, of the 61 grants that were approved in October, 20 or so will after all be allowed to start from 1 January 1984. Bondi was at pains to emphasize that the flow of money to universities in 1984-85 would be greater than for many years and, furthermore, that the council would be trying to find more funds from within its budget. It will not be asking the Advisory Board for the Research Councils for help.

Philip Campbell

UK agricultural research

Plans for 250 jobs to go

THE Agricultural and Food Research Council (AFRC) has now completed its strategic plan, intended as an adaptation to the expected substantial drop in its share of the science budget over the next few years. The plan, which has not yet been ratified, will be discussed next week at a meeting of AFRC's governing council.

As AFRC's secretary, Dr Ralph Riley, promised two weeks ago, the Agricultural Research Service will suffer "rather severe damage". The strategic plan suggests that all arable crop research should be moved to Rothamsted Experimental Station, in Hertfordshire. The work of the Weed Research Organization, in Oxfordshire, and the Long Ashton Research Station is to be centralized on one site, as is the research undertaken by the National Institute for Research in Dairying, near Reading, and the Grassland Research Institute in Sussex. Somewhat more tentatively, AFRC will consider moving additional animal research to the Institute of Animal Physiology in Cambridge. There are also plans to alter the remit of the Welsh Plant

Words from space

NATURE is able today to report the exciting news that there is life — of a kind — in outer space. Through the marvels of modern communications, President Ronald Reagan, Chancellor Helmut Kohl of West Germany, your correspondent and a few other European journalists were able on Monday to direct questions to a tiled, delta-shaped object circling the Earth, from which certain four-limbed silver-suited organisms responded apparently according to some preprogrammed instructions. Here is a sample of the conversation:

"Hello, this is London [we were instructed to say that] Robert Walgate from the science journal *Nature*. Is it possible for you to tell us yet of any preliminary results that you have from your experiments on board?"

Ulf Merbold replies "Yes — the Grille spectrometer [a Franco-Belgian experiment] measured very interesting things — we figured out that the . . . atmosphere contains a lot of microconstituents like ozone, carbon dioxide and [undecipherable]. And we got very accurate information on the concentration of these gases in all the different layers of the atmosphere. That is important, to develop a model of the atmosphere which will then predict, for instance, for how many more years we can pump carbon dioxide into the atmosphere [undecipherable] impact on the climate."

After a few more questions communications failed, and inserted a random chunk of soap opera in which a child chanted appropriately "Where are we?" as if disembodied from his transmitter, followed by a picture of the Earth with a satellite on it. Then someone back on Earth said "Come again another day". We may. On the other hand we may not.

Robert Walgate

Breeding Station to encourage more work on upland farming.

The other general themes contained in the plan have been known for some time. AFRC intends to expand its work in food research: the Rowett Research Institute in Aberdeen is scheduled to expand its work to encompass research on trace elements and nutritional disorders and other institutes may also benefit from this programme.

Job losses in the Agricultural Research Service as a whole are likely to be even higher than was expected only two weeks ago. By the latest account, 250 jobs will go before April. Institute directors have been asked to offer pay in lieu of notice.

Two weeks ago, on the occasion of the publication of the ARC annual report, Dr Riley said that the amount spent on agricultural research in Britain is roughly the same as that spent by 200 high-energy physicists. "I hope that those who make decisions between such different subjects know what they are doing." Tim Beardsley