

US research

Smithsonian center to close

Washington

ALTHOUGH it was known to be coming, the timing of the Smithsonian Institution decision to close the Smithsonian Environmental Research Center (SERC) in Rockville, Maryland, later this year has prompted cries of outrage from SERC-Rockville employees and their supporters.

Notice of the decision was contained in a memorandum sent to SERC-Rockville director William Klein on 21 March by Smithsonian assistant secretary for science David Challinor. During a visit to SERC-Rockville last February, Challinor told Klein and others that the Smithsonian was thinking of closing the center during the 1987 fiscal year. The March memorandum stated that the facility would close and all positions would be abolished on 14 November 1986, six weeks after the start of the 1987 fiscal year.

While the Smithsonian maintains that some employees will be offered positions at other Smithsonian facilities, that is not the impression left with employees.

What particularly rankles with people at SERC-Rockville is that they feel deci-

sions were made without their involvement. "I have not been consulted about this decision whatsoever", says Klein.

Also annoying has been the Smithsonian's opinion that SERC-Rockville's productivity "was not up to the standards of similar institutions". Those familiar with SERC-Rockville's work concede that the facility could have helped its cause by publishing more frequently.

SERC began in 1929 as part of the Smithsonian Astrophysical Observatory and became an independent bureau in 1969. It now occupies a leased facility in Rockville, a suburb of Washington, DC. The staff consists of 11 scientists and 34 support personnel, with an annual budget of around \$2 million. The centre is primarily devoted to photobiology, with current research projects focusing on blue and red light photoreceptors, accessory pigments and CO₂ photosynthesis. In addition, there is a solar radiation monitoring group and a carbon-dating facility, both likely to be retained elsewhere by the Smithsonian.

Two independent reviews of SERC-Rockville conducted in 1979 and 1981 for the Smithsonian concluded that the labo-

ratory lacked the "critical mass" of people and facilities to perform world class science. The possibility was considered of merging SERC-Rockville with a smaller SERC facility on the Chesapeake Bay, but the \$30 million price tag for a new facility was beyond the institution's budgetary grasp.

Several universities, including Johns Hopkins, Duke and the University of Maryland, expressed an interest in merging with SERC-Rockville, but were unwilling to make the financial commitment that the Smithsonian wanted.

The Smithsonian Institution ultimately decided that it could not afford to support SERC-Rockville at a level it felt was necessary for good science, and the decision to close the centre was hastened by the fact that the lease on the Rockville facility was due to expire in 1990.

Winslow Briggs, head of the department of plant biology at the Carnegie Institution of Washington in Stanford, California, calls SERC-Rockville's work "not terribly fashionable, but terribly important". He expressed disappointment at the Smithsonian's decision, and "outrage" that the closure would take place this year.

The Smithsonian is not blaming budget problems as the primary reason for the closure. Instead, says Ross Simons, programme manager in Challinor's office, the issue is "where Smithsonian science as a whole should be going". Simons says the Smithsonian's scientific strength in the natural sciences is in evolutionary biology, and that is where money saved from the SERC-Rockville closure will be spent. **Joseph Palca**

US engineering

Five more centres named

Washington

THE National Science Foundation (NSF) last week announced five more Engineering Research Centers, intended to foster interdisciplinary research and education in selected engineering fields. The five new centres, selected from 102 proposals from 75 institutions, will together receive \$56,300,000 over the next five years.

The first six NSF engineering research centres were announced in May 1985 in response to a widespread sentiment that NSF should be doing more to foster engineering research. Since then, NSF authorizing statutes have been amended to give greater prominence to engineering. But even with the new emphasis (enthusiastically championed by NSF's director Erich Bloch) the number of centers will not reach 25 by the end of fiscal

year 1987, a previously discussed target.

The existing six centres have succeeded in attracting substantial industrial support: \$13 million on top of the original \$10 million from NSF. The newly announced centres are expected to do likewise. Typically, 20-40 faculty members are involved in a centre, and collaboration with industry on engineering problems is mandatory. Observers are encouraged by progress so far. According to Lynn Preston of NSF's cross-disciplinary research directorate, the centres have inspired other universities and industry to establish cooperative research links along NSF lines even without NSF support. Some similar collaborative research centres are proposed to be funded this year by the Department of Defense under its new University Research Initiative. **Tim Beardsley**

Institution	Subject	Amount (over 5 years) (\$ million)
University of Utah & Brigham Young University	Advanced combustion Engineering	9.7
Carnegie-Mellon University	Engineering design technology	14.9
University of Illinois-Urbana	Compound semiconductor microelectronics	11.6
Lehigh University	Large structural systems	10.4
Ohio State University	Net shape manufacturing (direct near-final shape production)	9.7

EPA bars AGS test

Washington

THE Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has suspended the experimental use permit issued to Advanced Genetic Sciences (AGS) for field trials of genetically altered bacteria on strawberry plants until new data can be reviewed.

EPA will also fine AGS \$20,000, the maximum allowed by law, for testing the genetically altered version of *Pseudomonas syringae* under conditions that could have led to an environmental release of the bacteria. The EPA complaint charges AGS with misrepresentation and falsification of data, as well as use of an experimental substance in a manner not prescribed by agreed protocols.

Last month, AGS admitted that pathogenicity tests on the new bacteria, developed to protect crops from frost damage, were carried out on trees on the roof of its Oakland headquarters (see *Nature* 320, 2; 1986). EPA regulations require such tests to be conducted in an enclosed environment. AGS has now agreed to redo pathogenicity tests on the trees. **Joseph Palca**