

Money problems at NERC hit marine science laboratories

London

A FINANCIAL crisis alternately described as a "short-term cash-flow problem" or "the brink of bankruptcy" has hit the UK Natural Environment Research Council (NERC). Marine science laboratories are facing a serious funding shortfall, and research vessels remain tied up because sudden budget cutbacks mean there is no money for fuel. Some NERC community research programmes have been halted for the remainder of the financial year.

The marine division is especially feeling the pinch, after the Institute of Oceanographic Studies (IOS) lost a £2-million government contract to study deep disposal of high-level radioactive waste. The research had been going on for several years, but was unexpectedly stopped, amid accusations of a lack of government planning for future waste disposal.

Marine science laboratories throughout Britain are all being asked to tighten their belts. In addition to the IOS, programmes have also been pared down at the Marine Biological Association (MBA)'s laboratories at Plymouth, the Scottish MBA, NERC's Institute for Marine Environmental Research at Plymouth, the Proud-

man Oceanographic Laboratory at Bidston, and the Sea Mammal Research Unit at Cambridge.

NERC's funding squeeze is being blamed partly on an increase in staff salaries and partly on a shortfall in the government's science vote, which provides 70 per cent of NERC's £100 million budget.

Although the research council says its community programmes of directed research are its first priority, several of these interdisciplinary projects, including the Joint Global Ocean Flux Study and a North Sea study, have been frozen until the new financial year.

NERC is trying to put into practice the government's intention that more research should be funded by industry and other outside sources. Two seminars have been scheduled for late in the year, designed to promote more interest in commissioning research work.

Cost savings are a stated goal of the proposed merger between the two Plymouth-based marine laboratories, the Marine Biological Association and NERC's Institute of Marine Environmental Research. The creation of a joint facility was first proposed by a House of

Lords select committee, and later supported by a NERC visiting group. But NERC has been accused of trying to push the proposal through in a hurry.

"You might expect that with all the funding problems we're facing, 1987 is not a very opportune time for a major change like this", says MBA's acting director, Dr Eric Corner, who complains of "a very tight time schedule". Although negotiations are still proceeding, NERC says the new merged laboratory facility should be approved later this month and operating by next April.

MBA's council and membership still have to consider the merger, and some staff are not happy with the new prospects. But with nearly 95 per cent of the laboratory's funding provided by NERC, there is a feeling that cooperation with the plan is obligatory. **Kathy Johnston**

Radiation limits challenged

London

THE International Commission on Radiological Protection (ICRP) is being publicly challenged by 800 scientists who are asking for tighter radiation standards, in the light of revisions on the assessment of radiation doses received by Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic blast survivors.

The ICRP is reviewing its ten-year-old recommended radiation-exposure limits during its two-week meeting now under way in Como, Italy. Members are considering new data on cancer rates in Japanese atomic bomb survivors, after US epidemiologist Edward Radford reported that radiation doses were lower than originally estimated because of the screening effect of buildings. Existing dose limits are partly based on risk calculations derived from studies of the Japanese survivors.

Signatories to the petition say that new calculations show that risk estimates for fatal cancers from exposure to radiation are between two and five times too low. The ICRP is being asked to reduce five-fold the radiation dose limits for nuclear and other radiation workers, now set at 50 millisieverts per year, and to pay more attention to risks of non-fatal cancers.

The weighting factor used for exposure of gonads underestimates the risk of genetic damage and ignores the cancer risk, the critics say, and they also point out the sensitivity of fetuses to radiation.

Signatories to the petition include Nobel laureates Linus Pauling and George Wald, former Manhattan project scientist Joseph Rotblat, and Karl Morgan, a former senior member of the ICRP.

No decisions on changes to the radiation limits are expected from the ICRP before next autumn after more discussions.

Kathy Johnston

Paris science museum under attack

Paris

FRANCE'S controversial science and technology museum at La Villette in north-east Paris has come under attack from Jacques Valade, minister for research and technology. In an interview on French television last week, Valade said that the museum is "too expensive", as a result of "its youth and of the inadequacy and imprecision of initial budget estimates".

The state has provided FF600 million (£60 million) per year since the museum was opened 18 months ago, representing 80 per cent of its running costs. The museum itself yields about FF75 million while the 'Géode' — a geodesic dome housing a panoramic cinema — provides a further FF50 million in revenue.

On the basis of a confidential report by the inspector-general of finances, Mr Pierre Consigny, Valade said the year's results from La Villette were "terrifying", with 59 per cent of the models out of order. This figure has been contested by Mr Maurice Lévy, who retired as director of the museum on 7 September. Lévy puts the figure at 15–20 per cent and says that the failure rate is due to a number of factors: an exceptionally high percentage of interactive models, their heavy usage, the fact that many are prototypes and an inadequate maintenance budget.

The museum was conceived under Valéry Giscard d'Estaing's government, to be built instead of new abattoirs at La Villette, a project which created a scandal when it was abandoned in 1971, having cost FF950 million. The plan to build a science museum was adopted by the social-



The Géode at La Villette.

ists, under Mitterrand, and was inherited by Chirac on coming to power last year.

In answer to Valade's call for better financial management, Lévy said that 30 per cent of running costs could be provided from revenue, so long as the number of visitors continues to increase and given a more aggressive marketing strategy. Lévy envisages hiring space in the museum to private high-technology companies, the production and sale of audio-visual materials and the manufacture of 'executive toys'. A conference centre, recently opened on the site, is booked until July 1988 and the Géode typically sells 95 per cent of its seats. **Peter Coles**