

Professor Alan Thorpe
Chief Executive
Natural Environment Research Council
Polaris House
North Star Avenue
Swindon SN2 1EU

tel +44 020 7451 2526
fax +44 020 7451 2692
www.royalsoc.ac.uk

From the Biological Secretary and Vice-President Professor David Read FRS

15 February 2006

Our ref: RG/CEH
RS policy document 05/06

Dear Alan

Centre for Ecology and Hydrology – NERC Council statement of intent

Thank you for your letter dated 6 December 2005 regarding the outcome of discussions by the Council of the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) on the future of the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology (CEH) and the proposed closure of the Banchory, Dorset, Monks Wood and Oxford sites. In preparing this letter I have considered the views of a number of Fellows who have written to me regarding the proposals.

The Royal Society acknowledges that resource considerations underpin this proposal for rationalisation. However, we are concerned that such large scale cuts in core science funding will compromise the very high quality of environmental science for which CEH is renowned. Of particular concern in this regard are the threats posed to the vitally important long-term environmental monitoring sites, programmes, and data sets that play such a key role in underpinning our understanding of the natural environment and environmental change.

The Royal Society and the multi-academy groups of which it is a member have frequently highlighted the importance of long term environmental datasets and the analysis of this data in increasing understanding of the natural environment and environmental perturbations such as climate change. For example we have outlined the importance of good data sets for providing the basis for biodiversity measurement and assessment necessary to inform policy responses to the loss of biodiversity (Royal Society 2003, EASAC 2005). We have recommended that biodiversity monitoring programmes at the global and local levels be enhanced and funding increased to enable new assessment programmes to be established (Royal Society 2002, 2003).

CEH is the only UK organisation with the mandate for long-term environmental monitoring. Consequently it has played a crucial role in the development and maintenance of environmental quality monitoring and assessment programmes, many of which have been

invaluable for improving our understanding of the natural environment and ecosystem functioning. Much of this work has provided the long term data-sets on which UK biodiversity, and broader environment and natural resource policy decisions have been based. In particular, the UK Environmental Change Network has supplied essential information enabling the identification of environmental changes and increasing our understanding regarding the drivers of change.

I have reviewed the proposed CEH Business Plan (2005/06-2009/10) and I welcome the fact that it proposes to continue supporting much of its biodiversity research programme including important datasets and monitoring programmes. It is not however clear from this document what activity will cease (either in terms of entire programmes or parts of programmes), nor how this work will be continued with the loss of so many specialist staff. I trust that CEH's critical role in long-term monitoring will not be compromised by the closure of these sites, however without this information it is difficult to gain a clear understanding of the real implications of the proposed changes. I think it would be useful if this information was made available.

I am aware that in some cases long term monitoring locations occur within or close to the four sites that are proposed for closure. Should the closures go ahead, we expect that, subject to a satisfactory assessment of their scientific value, alternative arrangements will be made to continue the collection and analysis of data from these locations.

Finally, I take this opportunity to highlight the important role that organisations such as CEH play in enhancing and advocating science education. For example, CEH Dorset is currently engaged in the third of three projects with local schools funded with a Royal Society Partnership Grant. This is a valuable initiative providing opportunities for school-scientist partnerships in an area comparatively lacking in higher education institutions.

Yours sincerely,



Professor David Read

References

Royal Society 2003. Measuring biodiversity for conservation. Policy Document 11/03. Royal Society: London.

European Academies Science Advisory Council (EASAC) 2005. A user's guide to biodiversity indicators. Royal Society: London.

Royal Society 2002. Royal Society response to the Science and Technology Committee's inquiry into Systematics and Biodiversity. Royal Society: London.