

UK geology

Move from London opposed

THE British Geological Survey (BGS) is being forced to think again about a plan to move its scientific collections and library from their current prime site in South Kensington, London, to remote Keyworth in Nottinghamshire. Users protest that the move will leave the capital without a specialist geological library, while much of the library material at Keyworth will be duplicated or even triplicated.

The survey, known until this year as the Institute of Geological Sciences, is in dire financial straits. While two-thirds of its income is earned from commissioned research, it received £9 million from the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) in 1982-83. This year, BGS's grant from NERC is likely to be cut by 50-60 per cent. The move to Keyworth is seen as a way for NERC to achieve substantial savings but is proving very unpopular

Rifkin bugs bug

Washington

Mr Jeremy Rifkin, the United States' leading opponent of genetic engineering and the scourge of the biotechnology industry, was back in court last week seeking an injunction to prevent the University of California, Berkeley, from going ahead with its controversial frost-retarding experiment before a court had dealt with his suit alleging that the National Institutes of Health (NIH) had approved the experiment without adequately assessing the environmental dangers.

Berkeley had decided to postpone the experiment, which would entail the first-ever release of a DNA-modified organism into the environment, when Mr Rifkin threatened six months ago to seek a restraining order. Last year, Mr Rifkin and several environmental groups filed suit in federal court challenging NIH's decision to approve the release of such organisms (see *Nature* 305, 349; 1983). That trial is not expected to begin until May, but the University of California announced earlier this month that it intended to go ahead with the experiment as soon as weather permitted.

Judge John Sirica, who is to hear the full case later this year, has not yet decided whether to grant Mr Rifkin's preliminary injunction against the university. Meanwhile, Berkeley has released a statement emphasizing its confidence in the safety of the proposed experiment, under which potato plants will be sprayed with a DNA-modified version of a bacterium which, in its natural state, enhances the formation of frost on the crops. The modified version has been stripped of its ice-nucleating properties in the hope that it will displace its natural counterpart and enable crops to survive lower temperatures. Peter David

with BGS staff and users of the library and collections. Formal protests have been made by the University of London, the Palaeontographical Society and others.

BGS seems ready to accept that it will have to keep open some sort of information point in London where its publications and maps will be available for consultation. Large-scale geological maps are among the most used items in the library. But then, the argument goes, why not keep some of the books in London also, at least those that would be duplicated in Keyworth? BGS will say only that it is holding consultations. The consultations are less than urgent, however, as the buildings that will house the library and museum at Keyworth have not even been designed yet. Staff complain they are not kept adequately informed on progress.

The plan for the geological specimens is that reference collections in palaeontology and petrology will be moved to Keyworth, while those that are on public display in the existing Geological Museum in South Kensington will be transferred or loaned to the British Museum (Natural History) — BMNH — conveniently situated next door. BMNH will then eventually take over the

whole of the building now occupied by BGS.

The move of the reference collections to Keyworth is now accepted as inevitable by users, who nevertheless complain about the inaccessibility of the site (Keyworth has no railway station for example). But staff of the geological museum are very anxious that the merger with BMNH will not damage hopes of modernizing displays, some of which are hopelessly out of date (a display on oil omits to mention North Sea oil, and the museum boasts a large exhibit on ironstone mining in Northamptonshire that finished decades ago).

A NERC/BMNH working party on the merger included in its terms of reference the condition that geological sciences must be no less visible to the public in future than they have been in the past. BMNH has ambitious plans to integrate displays to cover all the natural sciences in a way neither museum can achieve alone. The Advisory Board for the Research Councils, which recommends the share-out of the science budget, approves of the proposed merger and has recommended a modest increase of resources for BMNH to take account of this. But the amount proposed (£2.3 million for each of the three years from 1984-85) will not, according to some, be enough to achieve the much-needed modernizations. **Tim Beardsley**

UK universities

New blood encouraged

BRITISH universities are now in the thick of a search for 400 academics aged under 35 to join their staffs at the beginning of next academic year. This year's quota of what are called "new blood" appointments (350) is an increase of 40 per cent on the allocations first made this time last year, although the proportion in scientific subjects has decreased. The number of appointments to be made under the "information technology scheme", 46, compares with last year's total of 70 posts. Most new blood appointments will be in the physical sciences, engineering and medicine.

This year many universities were better prepared to make their applications, having had a year to rehearse their arguments. Many were caught on the hop by the timetable for applications last year. Of the 46 information technology appointments to be made this year, 35 are designed to strengthen research while the remainder are intended to provide specialist courses, an increase in the number for research.

Universities seem to have mixed feelings about the schemes. While they are glad they can make appointments they could not otherwise afford, there is resentment in some quarters that they have to justify themselves to outside bodies such as the University Grants Committee and the Science and Engineering Research Council, which assists in assessing the applications. The Committee of Vice-Chancellors and

Principals distances itself from the scheme by saying it is convinced that universities' long-term planning and management should be returned as soon as possible to the universities. Some of the appointments made earlier this year are said to have attracted outstanding scientists into university research, while in areas such as computing, where there is strong competition from industry, difficulty was experienced in filling some posts. The University Grants Committee this year warns universities not to be too fussy in their requirements.

There was also last year some confusion over the financial operation of the scheme, which lasts for only three years. At the end of three years, financial allowances for those appointed will be incorporated into universities' recurrent grant: several appointments last year were made by departments which thought the earmarked grant of up to £20,000 (£21,000 from October) would continue indefinitely. Despite the increase in the total of new blood appointments to be made this year, the total amount of money for the scheme has not been increased and the University Grants Committee is at pains to point out that there will have to be a compensating reduction in the number of appointments made next year. Many universities that were unsuccessful last year profess surprise and bafflement about the way the allocations are made. **Tim Beardsley**