

U.K. ASTRONOMY

Funder Rejects RGO Rescue Plan

A business plan drawn up by the staff of the Royal Greenwich Observatory (RGO) to privatize their institution and thus save it from closure was rejected last week by the RGO's funder, the Particle Physics and Astronomy Research Council. PPARC said that the plan was too risky and costly, and that it threatened to turn the RGO into an unwelcome competitor for the new Astronomy Technology Centre (ATC), which PPARC is setting up in Edinburgh. The decision almost certainly means that the RGO will cease to exist in anything resembling its current form. "We are very disappointed indeed," says RGO director Jasper Wall. Martin Rees of Cambridge University, Britain's Astronomer Royal, says he has lost confidence in PPARC's decision-making.

Currently, both the RGO and the Royal Observatory, Edinburgh (ROE), provide technological support for Britain's ground-based astronomy program. But faced with a dwindling budget, PPARC has wanted to cut back on both observatories once construction of the twin 8-meter Gemini telescopes, in which the United Kingdom is an international partner, nears completion. To do this, PPARC announced earlier this year that the RGO would be closed and its technological capabilities, which are mainly in telescope design, would be

transferred to the new ATC based at the ROE (*Science*, 13 June, p. 1641). The move was expected to save \$4.1 million annually for the first 4 years, and \$6.8 million annually thereafter.

To try to save the RGO, the staff proposed setting up a not-for-profit company which would receive about half its revenue from PPARC for providing astronomical ser-



End of the road? Britain's most ancient observatory may soon cease to exist.

vices, such as data archiving, not transferred to Edinburgh. A third would come from establishing a business to build small, robotically controlled telescopes for the international market in collaboration with John Moores

University in Liverpool. And the remainder would be provided by PPARC grants for astronomical research. PPARC was also asked to invest \$2.2 million to set up the company, but RGO staff estimated that it would save more than that by not having to pay for redundancies and broken contracts.

Two committees set up by PPARC to look into the plan expressed concern about its financial viability and the element of competition it would pose to the ATC. The RGO would have retained some of its capacity to design telescopes and build charge-coupled device instruments, but PPARC's chief executive, Ken Pounds says, "we would be retaining some of the technological activity in Cambridge that we want in Edinburgh." The \$2.2 million payment was also deemed unacceptable.

The RGO has not given up and is seeking sponsorship or support from others. If that fails, it will cease to exist as a major institution, although its name might live on. Pounds says it might be linked in some way with astronomy research at Cambridge University, where the RGO is now, or it might be attached to a new museum for the public understanding of science in Greenwich. But the latter would be very unattractive to RGO staff, says Wall: This would be "theme parks instead of real work."

—Judy Redfearn

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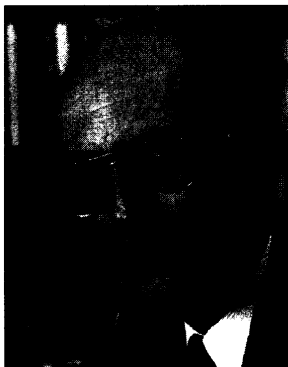
Panel Proposes Ways to Combat Fraud

MUNICH—Germany's main granting agency has taken a tentative step toward a more systemic approach to the problem of scientific fraud by floating a set of proposals developed by an international panel. The proposals, released this week, recommend ways for universities and research institutions to investigate alleged misconduct and foster ethical conduct, as well as to suggest that grants be denied to organizations that do not adopt effective procedures.

The proposals are the work of a 13-member "Self-Control in Science" panel created by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG), the country's main granting agency for basic research. The panel was formed in the wake of the country's most notorious scientific scandal in the postwar era, a case involving alleged falsifications in publications by two university professors.

DFG President Wolfgang Frühwald said that he "had not expected that this group would end up so united in its approach to such difficult issues." Frühwald anticipates "a

vigorous discussion" on the idea of denying grants to universities that do not adopt satisfactory procedures when the DFG's governing body, the Senat, debates the panel's recommendations early in 1998. One question



Common line. DFG's Wolfgang Frühwald (left) and Max Planck's Hubert Markl are both promoting measures to tackle fraud.

is whether the DFG has the legal authority to deny grants based on such criteria.

The panel, which met only twice, took a first stab at several issues that have confounded inquiries in other countries, notably

the United States. Among its 16 recommendations are:

- German universities and scientific institutions should name outside ombudsmen to hear "whistle-blower" complaints;
- Researchers and scientific publications should tighten co-authorship standards, eliminating "honorary co-authorships;"
- Primary research data used as the basis for publications should be preserved for at least 10 years; and
- Quantitative measures such as "impact factors" should not take precedence over qualitative assessments in decisions on grants and hirings.

At the same time, the panel rejected the notion that Germany set up a separate government bureaucracy to investigate misconduct, as was done for U.S. biomedical research through the Office of Research Integrity, to carry out investigations that are not resolved by the institution. "No one supported that concept," says Frühwald.

Frühwald formed the panel last summer after two German biomedical researchers—Ulm University professor Friedhelm Herrmann and former Lübeck University professor Marion Brach—were accused of falsifying or manipulating data in some three dozen publi-