

Warwick senate backs controversial plans

By news staff

Industry anger at plans by the University of Warwick to absorb Warwick HRI Wellesbourne into a school for life sciences turned to exasperation this week as the university's senate approved the latest proposals.

The draft proposal for the implementation of the new school put before the University senate meeting on Monday states that the only viable option for co-location of Warwick HRI and the university's biological sciences department was the main Warwick campus and that research activity based at Wellesbourne would be transferred "as soon as is practical".

Industry leaders were in little doubt that this could spell the loss of the bulk of near-market applied horticultural R&D activity.



Campaign: HW Save Our Science campaign is highlighting concerns over the future of applied horticultural R&D. See www.HorticultureWeek.co.uk/soscampaign

Neil Bragg, chair of the Horticultural Development Company — one of the main funders of R&D at Wellesbourne — said he was "absolutely disgusted" at the way the situation had been handled by the university. Hastily written letters from leading industry figures, who were given just three days by interim chairman of the new school Professor Stuart Palmer to comment before the senate hearing, had gone unacknowledged, said Bragg.

"This has been a well-planned move by the University of Warwick, which has a total disregard for stakeholders."

The proposal document which says nothing in its 33 pages about the ongoing R&D needs of the horticulture industry, makes it clear that research that receives a high score in academic journals will be

prioritised in decisions over which areas will be cut — automatically threatening more commercially oriented near-market R&D.

The document says the biological sciences department and Warwick HRI will have a consolidated planned deficit in 2009/10 of £1.8m and significant "restructuring of the cost base" is required.

Responding to Monday's decision by the senate to approve the proposals, HTA director general David Gwyther asked whether the university had consulted the Technology Strategy Board, "which has £75m to spend over the next five years and might have done something to fill the gap left by Defra's withdrawal of funding?"

He added: "How many more research resources — human and facilities — must close before those

who are talking about these issues eventually take some real action."

Processors & Growers Research Organisation technical director Anthony Biddle, who said the body had worked hard with others to try and save HRI Kirton from closure last year, was now "extremely concerned" that the latest plan "may seriously reduce applied research being done by Warwick HRI".

British Protected Ornamentals Association (BPOA) chairman Sarah Fairhurst said: "I am extremely disappointed by the consultation timescale and the way it has been handled. It reinforces the need for industry to fully support HW's Save Our Science campaign. The BPOA has responded to the consultation and will continue to press for a fuller consultation with a reasonable time frame."

Dear Professor Palmer... extracts from industry submissions sent last week



Phillip Effingham, chairman, Brassica Growers Association and director, Marshalls

"It has come to our attention that the university is considering this merger, which will move considerable resources away from applied R&D for industry to concentrate on more fundamental plant science.

"As an industry we are extremely concerned with yet more erosion of the near market and associated technology transfer elements at a time when food security is high up on the Government's agenda. The loss of these valuable resources is irrevocable and extremely damaging to an industry very much subject to market failure."



Peter Kendall, president, NFU

"Considering the importance of Warwick HRI for carrying out industry-relevant research, I would have expected to see longer

engagement and consultation with industry over these plans.

"I urge you to delay taking any further decisions until further consultation has taken place.

"The changes could reduce the focus on applied and translational research in favour of fundamental and basic research. This would be extremely unstrategic and poorly timed considering the government's focus on translation and skills. None of its initiatives will be delivered without skills and expertise to underpin them."



Gerry Hayman, representative, British Tomato Growers Association

"Although bitterly disappointed by the loss of the Glasshouse Crops Research Institute, we accepted promises made then about the continuation of industry-focussed research in the new facilities funded my MAFF. Since then we have seen a continued erosion in the funding of applied research and in the facilities

available for this.

"We are dismayed that this is now threatened even further by the planned changes to the research programme at Warwick HRI. We are not opposed to strategic research but need to be still in business to be able to benefit from its longer-term deliverables."



David Gwyther, director general, HTA

"Wellesbourne's role has always been fundamental in generating applied research, which is essential for the hard-pressed horticulture sector. Its disappearance from the arena will leave us with a very limited R&D resource at a time when the sector is having to deal with the ramifications of new legislation as well as the need to innovate and improve productivity.

"It also has an increasing role to play in delivering the Government's environmental and health agendas, given the contributions of both ornamental and edible plants to

absorption of carbon and excessive rain waters, dealing with light and sound pollution, improving behaviour on the streets and in schools, improving recovery rates and promoting healthy eating."



Professor Geoff Dixon, chairman, Vegetable Consultants Association

"When the University of Warwick acquired Wellesbourne from Defra it shouldered substantial responsibilities towards the horticulture industry. These may well not have been made fully apparent to the university's management at the time. Nonetheless their acceptance was at least tacitly inferred. If the university now intends to divest itself of these responsibilities, then that becomes a matter of much wider interest.

"You are obliged to debate with the industry's leaders the manner by which applied horticultural research may be continued at Wellesbourne at the level of excellence achieved over the past 50 years."