



British  
Hydrological  
Society

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## From the President

To

Judy Parker  
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29 August 2013

### **FAO Professor Robert Allison**

Dear Professor Allison

#### **Review of NERC Research Centres**

Thank you for inviting the British Hydrological Society (BHS) to present evidence to the forthcoming review of the ownership and governance of NERC research centres. BHS is a learned body with individual membership open to all who are interested in hydrology. We currently have over 1000 individual members, spread fairly evenly between universities, private and public sectors, and seek to provide a link between researchers and practitioners in hydrology. The Society is supported by the Institution of Civil Engineers (BHS is an Associated Society of ICE) and, to a more limited extent, by the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology.

The Society is not aware of the reasons behind this review, though we suspect saving money might be one of them. On the assumption that the review is to assess what might be best for hydrological science in the UK, and what the country might expect to gain from supporting it, we suggest that just looking at the ownership and governance structure is not perhaps the most obvious focus for a review to take.

Firstly we would ask you to consider what UK hydrological science needs. Hydrology is now part of the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology. Although we accept that there are considerable links between ecology and hydrology these are no greater, indeed probably less than, the links between hydrology and hydrogeology or hydrology and meteorology. It makes sense to us to consider the hydrological cycle as a whole, and it is baffling that research in such a fundamental science is so fragmented

Many of the major advances made in UK hydrology were achieved when there was an Institute of Hydrology, which could focus on the subject. The catchment-scale studies, the flood studies report and low flow studies, advances in instrumentation and mathematical modelling, in fact all the developments that Wallingford Hydrosolutions now markets, were conceived, established and

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**President Bob Sargent**

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developed by the Institute of Hydrology. Much as we admire the current work of our colleagues at the CEH it has been in no way as significant as the major advances made in previous decades. Hydrology in the UK has languished since the formation of CEH. It is poorly resourced, fragmented, unfocussed and lacking any sense of long term aim.

This is a serious issue when the country faces growing problems with water management, drought and climate change, which brings us on to what the country should expect from hydrology and hydrologists. Hydrological understanding is crucial to our management of these issues, and they are of such pressing concern in the world that development of appropriate solutions is a significant international opportunity. It merits a focused research body that has support of and communication with central government.

Setting the agenda, co-ordinating effort and promoting UK science to the world are all political activities. It seems a nonsense to consider that it could be achieved with equivalent gravitas either by a commercial organization or piecemeal by competing universities.

As evidence for what could, and should, be done we cite the example of Singapore. Here a concerted effort is made to develop and sell the hydrological expertise of each country in a co-ordinated manner. The government has had a leading role in setting the direction of research and development, and in promoting the hydrological expertise of the country to export markets. It has co-ordinated political effort, the universities and business interests with the aim of becoming a regional or even world centre of excellence in some aspects of hydrology, especially in water resources management and water re-use.

This effort has included political support for research programmes, international awards and conferences -what is now the Singapore International Water Week conference for example. The government has also promoted the signing of international memoranda of understanding with target countries many of which, the Arab Emirates for example, used to be UK markets for our hydrological expertise. The UK hydrological industry in contrast is fragmented and, without such political support, continues to lose international markets.

It is difficult to see how the top level of hydrological infrastructure in this country could hope to compete if not directly supported by government.

We therefore ask that if the research institutes are to be reviewed, the review should consider how research into the whole hydrological cycle can be brought together, how the research agenda can be re-invigorated and focused on pressing national and international issues and how UK hydrological science can be promoted to the world.

We wish you every success on your review. If we can help in any way please let me know.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Bob Sayer", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

President, BHS