

Planning our priorities

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The time has come for us to develop NERC's new strategy, building on our current *Science for a sustainable future*. Our strategy is important for several reasons. It sets out the overall context for environmental science and it defines priorities for NERC's strategic research. Our strategy also shows our stakeholders, including the researchers we support, how NERC intends to invest in people, in knowledge, and in the organisation. Our new strategy will be synchronised with the Government's Comprehensive Spending Review, 2007, and will be crucial in showing what we hope to achieve with NERC's allocation from the Science Budget. *Science for a sustainable future* was well received, and it strongly made the case for Earth system science. But the specific agenda moves on, and our new strategy needs to look forward to where the frontiers of environmental science research will be over the next five to ten years.

A good strategy should inspire society at large, our stakeholders (such as the UK Government), the scientists we fund, and also the wider scientific community. Developing the next strategy is going to be a tough call!

Nevertheless, we are getting underway. NERC's governing Council and our Science and Innovation Strategy Board are overseeing the process, which will also involve a large number of NERC's scientists and stakeholders. Council has appointed a sub-group and it has brainstormed a skeleton framework for the strategy, mostly to enable the next steps to be taken.

As well as the science goals, the strategy will set out what we aim to deliver in terms of: helping society and the economy use scientific knowledge; scientific infrastructure; people and our organisation. This is a vital component of the strategy. NERC has research and collaborative centres, directed science programmes, curiosity-driven 'blue skies' grants and training programme etc, for very good reasons, and too often we forget to spell these out.

But let me now focus on the science. I believe that the rationale for NERC-funded research is that it should provide scientific evidence to help society cope with increasing pressures on our natural resources and global climate, arising both from rapid economic and population

growth in the developing world, and the sustained demand for fossil fuels in advanced economies. We need new knowledge that lets us foresee the environmental changes our actions as a global society bring.

Our skeleton framework identifies seven broad science themes. For each of these, a panel of experts is starting to develop NERC's strategy. The panels' work is to help define the science priorities within each theme, and they will report back to Council over the next few months. Once finalised, the strategy will guide NERC Council as it makes difficult choices about how NERC should use its resources. The working titles for the themes are:

- Forecasting and mitigating natural hazards
- Environment, pollution and human health
- Biodiversity
- Climate systems
- Sustainable use of natural resources
- Driving forces and feedbacks in the total Earth system
- Technologies

The latter two cut across the other themes and remind us that it is crucial to understand the processes that govern how the planet operates, and to develop innovative technologies for measuring and modelling how the components of the Earth system fit together as a whole.

It will be important to define the seven themes well, and at present these are only working titles. The panels will use short defining statements to focus their deliberations. I also want to encourage you, the readers, to contribute ideas as the panels do their work. You can comment via www.nerc.ac.uk/consult/strategy07.

Of course, once we have a complete draft strategy, that will be fully open for consultation as well. Please get involved and have your say. Developing an exciting strategy is crucial to NERC's success. You can help us get this right and I value all contributions.