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Dear Judy,

### **The ownership and governance of the NERC centres**

I write on behalf of the British Ecological Society (BES) in response to NERC's call for evidence on the merits of establishing the NERC research centres as independent bodies, outside of the public sector.

The British Ecological Society is the UK's learned society for the science of ecology, and is the oldest such organization in world. Our membership comprises over 4,000 ecologists worldwide, including those working at the country's top research institutions. The BES celebrated its centenary this year, and continues to pursue its mission of advancing ecology and making it count in decision-making.

The Society has very strong links with the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology, through BES members based at CEH and those employed in universities and elsewhere who make use of its outputs. The BES is also a partner with CEH in the Natural Capital Initiative. Ultimately it is ecological science as a discipline that benefits from CEH's work, and our response is driven by our interest in ensuring that the science of ecology is well supported.

### **1. The unique public contribution of the NERC centres – long term datasets**

It is important to understand the unique contribution that institutions such as CEH make, in order to ensure that these features are able to flourish in any change of ownership or governance.

The NERC centres uniquely provide consistent long-term data<sup>1</sup>, including from ecological studies that are undertaken over the course of decades or even centuries. For instance, the Predatory Bird Monitoring Scheme<sup>2</sup> has been running for over 40 years and the National Riverflow Archive has entries dating back to 1841. Both of these provide crucial data for policy decisions and cutting edge research. Under the current ownership model, such studies are rightly protected from changes in

<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.ceh.ac.uk/data/datasetsandfacilities.html> for details of major dataset holdings

<sup>2</sup> <http://pbms.ceh.ac.uk/>

fashion or the fluctuations of short-term demands of the market, and provide a vital national resource of information and the corresponding specialist expertise required to make best use of it. These studies allow us to maintain records that support science research; without them, the science of ecology would be constrained in the ways in which it can progress.

CEH is also able to gather the resources needed for large-scale national projects such as the Countryside Survey, and this ability should also be protected.

We recommend that NERC provides an appropriate guarantee of continuing public functions such as this alongside any shorter-term consultancy operations. The motivations and nature of private and public funding are different; a move to take advantage of private-sector opportunities should not compromise delivery of services that other funders will not pay for over the necessary timescale.

## **2. Ownership and use of data produced by CEH**

In evaluating the merits of a change of ownership model, NERC must consider the implications of a change in ownership of the data produced by bodies such as CEH. At present, CEH data is made freely available to researchers, and this provides effective support for ecological science. Moreover, the current approach aligns with the government's drive towards open data and any change to private ownership will need to be considered carefully. It would be prudent to evaluate how BBSRC has handled ownership of and access to the Rothamstead datasets, and consider and problems that may have arisen.

## **3. Capitalising on recent investment**

NERC has invested recently in new CEH facilities at Wallingford and Lancaster that align with the Centre's current aims and objectives. It is important that the ownership model for CEH allows it to capitalise on this investment, and provide stability for its activities after a period of change.

## **4. Development of alternative ownership and governance models**

A range of possible models for ownership and governance of the centres exists, and in developing proposals for further consultation we recommend that the structures used in the BBSRC centres and the James Hutton Institute are evaluated as part of the process. These may provide the basis for a model which provides a 'win-win' – a system which safeguards the public contribution of the centres and provides a national resource, while also allowing for additional outside investment that could lead to spin-out companies.

We look forward to contributing further as NERC considers its options and would be pleased to expand on any of the points above as needed.

Yours sincerely



Professor William Sutherland  
**President**  
British Ecological Society