

**Recommendation #253
Consequences of Loss of Core DOE Funding by
the Savannah River Ecology Laboratory (SREL)**

Background

Dr. Eugene P. Odum and his students from the University of Georgia began ecological baseline studies on the Savannah River Site (SRS) and founded the Savannah River Ecology Laboratory (SREL) in 1951. SREL's mission, as defined in its Cooperative Agreement with the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE), was to provide an independent evaluation of the ecological effects of SRS operations through an integrated program of ecological research, education, and outreach. This program involves basic and applied environmental research, with emphasis upon expanding the understanding of ecological processes and principles, and upon evaluating the impacts of industrial and land use activities on the environment.

SREL has been recognized internationally as a leader in many ecological disciplines including radiation ecology, toxicology, and general ecology and has served as a training ground for hundreds of future scientists and engineers in the field. SREL, housed on the Savannah River nuclear site since 1951 and run by the University of Georgia, has played an important part in the remediation activities at the Savannah River site (SRS) and across the DOE complex. During the past 56 years of SREL operations, over 3000 papers have been published in peer-reviewed scientific journals based upon research conducted at SREL. These papers have covered such important topics as the restoration of degraded wildlife habitats, the environmental impact of the use of nuclear materials and the effects of environmental contamination.

The long and productive history of SREL, however, may be coming to an end. Even before the Investigations and Oversight (I&O) and Energy and Environment Subcommittees of the House Committee on Science and Technology conducted their initial hearing on the SREL funding situation, the future of SREL was uncertain. In a June 15, 2007 letter, the UGA president committed to "reducing significantly the core laboratory facilities" (Ref. 1). Approximately 40 SREL employees were terminated on June 30, 2007 and the six UGA-tenured faculty were instructed to transfer their primary research activities to the Athens campus," although research involving UGA faculty, students, and support personnel [was expected] to continue at SRS field sites for the remaining life of the 2006-2011 Cooperative Agreement." (Ref.1) The few employees who remain at SREL will work toward completing outstanding commitments on SREL's 40 plus active external grants. After that the future of SREL is uncertain.

In the meantime the remaining staff at SREL, with some support and limited transition funding from the University of Georgia, are committed to diversify and broaden their funding base in order to keep SREL in existence although at a dramatically reduced level. (Ref. 2) Without DOE core support this will be very difficult.

Comment

The SRS Citizens Advisory Board (CAB) considers the Savannah River Ecology Laboratory to be a national treasure and a vital component of the SRS community. The general public and the scientific community consider SREL to be an independent and credible source of information

about environmental issues on the Savannah River Site and elsewhere. The SRS CAB is extremely disappointed to hear that funding for SREL, which is a very modest portion of the SRS budget (about 1/3 to 1/2 of 1%), has been reduced to zero.

The concerns now shift toward a continuation of independent research and preservation of long-term historical data collection. In addition, the SRS CAB is concerned about the disposition of the physical resources, the analytical equipment, and the animals used in educational outreach. Taxpayer dollars were spent acquiring the resources to support the mission of the lab.

Recommendation

The SRS CAB and local stakeholders need assurances and answers about the future of SREL. Therefore, the SRS CAB recommends the following:

1. By January 28, 2008, DOE-SR provide a detailed inventory of the existing SREL physical resources, including facilities and analytical equipment, and describe the disposition plan for all items of significant value.
2. By January 28, 2008, DOE-SR identify and describe how the extremely valuable, irreplaceable long-term historical data sets created and established at SREL will be preserved, maintained, and made available for use by the scientific community.
3. Several of the studies (including, but not limited to, Rainbow Bay Amphibian Monitoring, Par Pond waterfowl studies) contributing to these data sets are currently ongoing and have relevance to such energy-related topics as biofuels and global climate change. By January 28, 2008, DOE-SR inform the CAB whether these studies will be discontinued if outside support is not found.
4. By January 28, 2008, DOE-SR identify what contracting model (broad-based competitive acquisition, direct grants to universities, etc.) will be used to fulfill the research, education and outreach support previously provided by SREL and what the estimated funding will be.

References

1. Letter from UGA President Michael F. Adams to DOE Samuel W. Bodman, U.S. Secretary of Energy, DOE, June 15, 2007.
2. Statement "A Memo About the Future of SREL," by Dr. David Lee, Vice-president for Research, UGA and Dr. Carl Bergman, UGA interim director of SREL, <http://www.uga.edu/~srel/SRELfuture.htm>