



The New Zealand Association of Scientists (Inc.)
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The 2010 Budget and CRI Culture

Government is engaged in the biggest shake-up of science funding and science management the country has seen for over 20 years. It's clear that the 2010 Budget will be a key component of setting the scene for the coming few years.

"The most serious issues in the science sector are micro-management and excessive competition for too little funding. Beyond reducing compliance costs by reorganising Government science agencies (MoRST and FRST), there is a clear case for significantly increased Government investment in science" said Dr James Renwick, President of NZAS.

"As is well-known, New Zealand is near the bottom of the OECD list in terms of public and private investment in research, science and technology (RS&T). No wonder our productivity and GDP per capita have slipped compared to countries such as Denmark and Singapore that are increasing investment in research and development."

Government announcements last week on extra funding for facilitating business development are a step in the right direction. "But they do little to ease key issues facing the RS&T sector" said Dr Renwick. "Taking money away from health, social and environment research to part-fund the new development initiatives sends a very bad signal. If investment in already underfunded basic research doesn't keep up, we'll have little for business to develop, in the longer term."

Whatever the overall level of Government investment in New Zealand RS&T, there need to be large changes to the way funding is administered and distributed. By introducing a non-competitive system for some of the funding CRIs presently receive through FRST, Government hopes to change the culture of the CRIs and the science sector, away from the fiercely competitive environment that's grown up over the past 20 years. However, many CRIs rely on FRST for only half their income, the other half coming largely from consulting work across government and private sectors.

Reducing competition for about half of each CRI's government income is a very positive move but it still leaves the CRIs having to source roughly two out of every three dollars through competitive bidding for public or commercial contracts. "The on-going scrabble for this funding is going to continue to dominate the way CRIs operate" said Dr Renwick.

"Twenty years ago, competition for public funding might have been regarded as necessary to keep CRIs honest. Now they are under more than enough commercial pressure to achieve this end. The Government is moving in the right direction, but to really effect change, they should be looking at making a much greater fraction of public funding for CRIs available on a non-competitive basis, while retaining appropriate accountability."

This week's Budget announcements will help define how successful the current changes to the New Zealand RS&T sector will be. NZAS is looking to Government for bold changes, not tinkering around the edges.

New Zealand Association of Scientists (nzas.rsnz.org) is a nationwide association of practicing research scientists spanning the universities, technical institutes, Crown Research Institutes of Science NZ, government departments, industry, museums, other science institutions, and independent researchers.

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