
Press release

New Zealand Association of Scientists, 15 March 2012

Super-ministry not good for health or the environment

The Government's plans* to merge the Ministries of economic development (MED) and Science and Innovation (MSI), the Department of Labour (DOL), and the Department of Building and Housing (DBH), demonstrate a lack of vision around environmental sustainability and human health and well-being, according to the New Zealand Association of Scientists.

'Such a merger shows a desire for science in New Zealand to focus on the short-term bottom line' said Professor Shaun Hendy, President of NZAS. 'But it makes no sense in terms of environmental science for environmental sustainability or in terms of health science to improve the wellbeing of New Zealanders' said Professor Hendy.

'We know that more scientific research is needed to grow industry, manufacturing and exports. But large components of the science system are concerned with the broader view, such as environmental and health science research, areas that do not often deliver an immediate payoff but which can be immensely valuable over longer time frames' Professor Hendy remarked.

The recent report of the McGuinness Institute on the government science system in New Zealand (<http://www.mcguinnessinstitute.org/>) also highlights the need for a long-term vision for science.

If the newly-formed MSI is to be subsumed into MED, then environmental science management should become the purview of the Ministry for the Environment, and health research should be managed by the Ministry of Health, with suitable allocation of funding, according to the NZAS.

An explicit focus on science purely for economic growth would only further destabilise an already splintered New Zealand science sector. The creation of MSI has had some positives for New Zealand science, but it has not been in place for long enough to establish a coherent strategy for the sector. 'Further change such as this is likely to add more uncertainty to funding structures and to science career paths, especially for younger scientists', said Professor Hendy.

NZAS is hosting a conference on 16 April to address the issue of career paths for early-career scientists (<http://www.scientists.org.nz/event/2012/2012-nzas-conference>). Confirmed speakers include the Minister for Science and Innovation, the Hon. Stephen Joyce, and the leader of the Labour Party and Labour spokesperson on Science and Innovation, David Shearer.

The New Zealand Association of Scientists (www.scientists.org.nz) is a nationwide association of practising research scientists spanning the universities, technical institutes, Crown research institutes, government departments, industry, museums, other science institutions, and independent researchers.

** Mr Key announced [15 March 2012] Cabinet has agreed in principle to establish a single, dedicated, business-facing government department. The new Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment will integrate the functions of: the Ministry of Economic Development; the Department of Labour; the Ministry of Science and Innovation; and the Department of Building and Housing. This follows similar moves in Australia and the United Kingdom. 'This new department will help to drive the Government's priority of building a more productive and competitive economy', Mr Key said. 'Our intention is to create the Ministry on 1 July this year. It is also our intention for current employees of the four departments to move across to the new Ministry on 1 July, and for there to be changes at the senior leadership team level'.*