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Museum director quits over Smithsonian restructuring

By CORIE LOK

[WASHINGTON] Plans to streamline research at the Smithsonian Institution, the world's largest museum complex, remained steeped in controversy last week with the resignation of the director of its National Museum of Natural History. Robert Fri quit his post at the museum, which contains the institution's largest research operation, apparently in protest at the proposed restructuring. In an effort to defuse the mounting tension between management and scientists over its plans, the Smithsonian's administration will this week name a 15-member committee to advise it on the details of the restructuring.

The panel will be chaired by Jeremy Sabloff, director of the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in Philadelphia. It will feature members drawn from both inside and outside the Smithsonian.

The institution's governing Board of Regents voted to set up the advisory panel last month (see Nature 411, 119; 2001), after Smithsonian secretary Larry Small and science undersecretary Dennis O'Connor were criticized for pushing their restructuring plan through without consulting scientists.

According to Smithsonian officials, that plan has now been put on hold, pending the advisory panel's recommendations. But the institution's scientists remain sceptical of the panel's influence and believe that parts of the plan, including the separation of the management of research from that of exhibitions, are almost certain to be adopted.

Changes due: plans include separating the management of research from that of exhibitions.

In his resignation statement Fri said: "It seems likely that the research and collections responsibilities of the museum will report directly to the undersecretary for science." Restructuring the museum "will require the leadership of a management team committed to pursuing its success over the long haul", he continued. "I do not feel that I can make that commitment enthusiastically." Fri will stay on as director until the end of September.

According to Brian Huber, a palaeobiologist at the National Museum of Natural History and chair of the Smithsonian's academic senate, the separation of research and exhibits would jeopardize the Smithsonian's mission of increasing and disseminating knowledge. Exhibits require input and interaction with scientists, he says.

Such a separation was discussed at a meeting of the Board of Regents last month and is seen as "a good idea", according to board member Manuel Ibanez, a retired biologist and former president of Texas A&M University in Kingsville. Bringing research under one director could increase efficiency without preventing interaction between scientists and exhibit staff, he says.

But no final decisions were made on the proposal and the board remains open to the advisory panel's recommendations, according to Hanna Gray, another board member, a historian and former president of the University of Chicago.

Huber says that an ad hoc group of scientists, of which he is part, is putting together its own restructuring proposal and will submit its plan to the advisory panel later this summer.

Sources at the Smithsonian say that Rita Colwell, director of the National Science Foundation, was invited to co-chair the advisory panel with Sabloff but declined to do so. Colwell would not comment.

Meanwhile, the institution's restructuring plans, which must be approved by the Congress, came under attack on another front, with two Maryland senators writing to Small protesting over the proposed closure of the Smithsonian Center for Materials Research and Education in Suitland, Maryland. Small backed down last month from closing the Conservation and Research Center in Front Royal, Virginia, in the face of opposition from researchers and Virginia congressmen.