

## Dinosaur geologists face extinction

SQUEEZED by a decade of rising salaries and static budgets, the US Geological Survey has told more than 500 of its geologists that they will be out of a job in October.

Dave Russ, associate chief geologist at USGS, said that what is left of the survey's budget for this year—about 5 to 6 per cent—is “not enough for a field science”. Critics agree that changes are needed at the USGS, but are worried that the cuts may cripple basic geological research.

“The main problem is the way it's being done,” says John Morgan, a geologist with the USGS in Reston, Virginia, who was one of those made redundant this week.

The USGS's Geologic Division, which carries out Earth science research and employs some 2200 people, became top-heavy with highly paid senior scientists in the early 1980s after a previous round of cuts reduced the staff from 3800.

In his first talk to staff after he was named director of the USGS last year, Gordon Eaton joked that the difference between the survey and *Jurassic Park* was that “one is this lovely park full of old dinosaurs, and the other's a movie”.

In order to prepare for the cuts, staff committees were asked to evaluate research programmes and to identify which jobs were crucial. Eaton also decided to split the Geologic Division into eastern, central and western divisions, hoping to make it more responsive to local needs.

The reorganised agency will put “less emphasis on resources and more on geological hazards”, Russ said. Other cuts will affect palaeontology, analytical services and isotope geochemistry. Russ said the shifts reflected changing priorities, with increases in research in stable isotope dating, which is important for work on global change, but decreases in the dating of Precambrian rocks, which is mainly of interest as basic research.

Critics fear that the cuts will further squeeze basic research. “If the survey significantly reduces its basic research, it's going to become a third-rate bureau,” says Brent Dalrymple, an eminent geologist who took early retirement from the survey last year.

The survey may also face legal challenges from staff who lose their jobs. A government lawyer has already been asked to investigate complaints that the cuts do not meet the complex legal requirements that have to be met before government employees can be fired.

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