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warwick university has decided to close horticultural research international

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Warwick HRI to close

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Research institute Warwick HRI is to close its doors as part of a merger aiming to plug a multi-million pound leak in costs.

Warwick University has decided to close Horticultural Research International, which it took over in 2004, as the centre was losing the university £2 million a year.

Warwick HRI, currently based in Wellesbourne, is to be brought under the umbrella of the main campus Biological Sciences department by 2012 to create the School of Life Sciences, with some of HRI's glasshouses and fields set to be lost.

The decision, made by the university's senate last week, has been branded as "scientific vandalism" by the union Prospect, and comes at a time when policy-makers are looking to increase commercial production and other research institutes are calling for increased funding.

The Wellesbourne site has unique laboratory, glasshouse and field facilities, which are also used by other leading research organisations and industry bodies.

It is thought that 34 of the 89 current academics' jobs at the 192-hectare Wellesbourne site are at risk, with 55-60 academic posts available at the merged department.

Nigel Titchen, vice-president of Prospect, said: "This is nothing short of scientific vandalism. The university has totally ignored the well-founded concerns of staff, the industry and funders and is ploughing ahead with an ill-conceived plan that will [deprive] the UK of vital horticultural research capability at a time of widespread public concern over food security.

"Warwick HRI does vital research on how to grow more food without damaging the environment. The university plans will wreck this globally important work."

The union alleges that just 11 days' notice of the proposals was given to staff via their union and there was no prior consultation with policy-makers or funders. Prospect also claims the Warwick Advisory Group's report into the move makes no sense on economic, public health, food security or environmental grounds and fails to take into account funding sources available from DEFRA, the Technology Strategy Board and industry.

But Peter Dunn, head of communications at the university, told freshinfo: "We are ranked among the top 10 research universities, which is important [in order] to get funding. We have built up this standing over time, but unfortunately it is currently unsustainable to run HRI.

“Whether it is the government, industry or research councils, someone has to pay for the research and we are currently losing £2m a year, which is a problem when you are a non-profit-making organisation.

“There are a number of synergies between the two departments and the university decided the decision made sense. HRI is committed to its ongoing research until 2012. We don’t yet know which facilities or staff may be lost, but the department is currently unsustainable and its costs are projected to grow.”