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Physicists fail to stall cuts despite subject review

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By **Zoe Corbyn**

Physicists and astronomers battling with their research council over plans to cut funding heard this week that there would be no reprieve while the Government-initiated Wakeham review of physics carries out its work.

Amid renewed calls by their organisations for a moratorium on the cuts and the release of details of the Wakeham review - which is to report in the autumn - Keith Mason, the chief executive of the Science and Technology Facilities Council, told MPs that stalling cuts while the review proceeded was "not an option".

"It is not the intention that (the review) will impact on the budget of the STFC in this spending review," he told the Innovation, Universities and Skills Select Committee. The Commons committee met to consider the STFC's budget, which proposes an £80 million cut.

The lack of overlap between the STFC's budget plans and the Wakeham review will dismay many scientists who see the review as a lifeline to save them from cuts made by the STFC without, they say, proper consultation.

Professor Mason played down the impacts of the cuts during the hearing, which lasted more than two hours and which also took evidence from physics and astronomy learned societies. Campaigners have "misunderstood" the effects of the cuts, he said.

Although the council confirmed a 25 per cent cut to grant funding, he told *Times Higher Education* "physics departments will only be 10 per cent worse off in 2010 than they were in 2005".

He also dismissed concerns raised by the Russell Group of research-intensive universities that physics departments would be more likely to close because of the cuts.

"Full economic costs (infrastructure money provided by the council) give them a huge extra resource to manage their budget," Professor Mason said. "I don't see any reason why physics students or postdocs should be demoralised."

Bill Wakeham, vice-chancellor of the University of Southampton, will lead the review with a panel of ten members, with four nominated by the learned societies.

The hearing follows the release of documents to campaigners under the Freedom of Information Act showing that the Government had been made aware of the damaging effects of its "flat-cash" settlement ahead of its final decision to allocate funds.

The Institute of Physics has claimed that departments could lose up to £750,000 each from FEC infrastructure funding alone.

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