



Current Chilean President Michelle Bachelet has her own plans for science governance.

“Putting science in a ministry not dedicated to it prevents the minister from spending enough time on research policy.” He thinks that a single unified ministry would ensure “a big leap” in the ability to transfer knowledge within Chile. Bravo says that a dedicated institution would “have more financial independence”.

In April 2013, after years of campaigning, a group of organizations — including several scientific academies and societies and Santiago-based pro-science lobby group the More Science Foundation — presented Piñera with an open letter asking that science policy be unified in a single ministry. The petition had 5,000 signatories.

Piñera responded by creating a working group of academics and politicians, led by engineer and entrepreneur Bruno Philippi, to evaluate Chilean scientific governance and propose changes. In a report released last May, the group urged the government to create the ministry.

Piñera’s 7 March proposal to the Senate was strongly based on that report. According to his draft submission, the ministry would have had two sub-secretariats: one for higher education and another for science, technology and innovation. Furthermore, Chile’s main science-funding body, the National Commission for Scientific and Technological Research (CONICYT), would regain a role in advising the president on science policy that was taken from it by the authoritarian regime of General Augusto Pinochet in 1973. CONICYT’s resumption of this role would ensure that the president is advised by a dedicated science-governance body.

Most of Piñera’s proposal is widely supported by the Chilean scientific community, says Sergio Hojman, a physicist at the University of Chile in Santiago and a member of the working group headed by Philippi. But some scientists are sceptical about the feasibility and

benefits of the plan. “Building a ministry that works may take decades in Chile,” says Mario Durán Toro, an engineer at the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile in Santiago. “It would be enough to re-establish the role that CONICYT had before 1974: that would be much more effective and quick,” he says.

As well as potentially taking funds away from the government’s own priorities, the proposed ministry conflicts with the coalition’s plans: Bachelet’s electoral manifesto put

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science in a sub-secretariat of the economy ministry, not a ministry of its own. Still, Hojman thinks that Bachelet is not necessarily opposed to the science ministry in principle, given that several members of the Philippi commission are supporters of government coalition parties.

The poor timing of the proposal may also have affected its chances. “Presenting it at the last minute is something that was going to be seen with a bad eye by the new government,” says Carolina Muñoz, a chemist and executive director of the More Science Foundation. “But withdrawing it would show a very serious lack of respect towards Chilean scientists.”

Finance minister Alberto Arenas is expected to advise on the financial viability of the science ministry in a report on the state of the country’s finances on 7 April. ■

CORRECTION

The News story ‘Global seismic network takes to the seas’ (*Nature* **507**, 151; 2014) wrongly located USGS seismologist Cecily Wolfe at the University of Hawaii in Honolulu instead of at Reston, Virginia.