

## European Communities

# More attention for basic research?

Brussels

Karl-Heinz Narjes, research commissioner of the European Economic Community (EEC), seems to be edging towards a more balanced programme of Community research. At an informal meeting of research ministers in Rome last week, he urged that industrial competitiveness should dominate the programme to the exclusion of research in fields with fewer technological benefits.

As things are, the EEC programme is dominated by schemes for improving European competitiveness vis-à-vis the United States and Japan (notably the ESPRIT and BRITE programmes). But Narjes stressed last week that there are "yawning gaps" in agricultural research, for example, especially the reduction of surpluses, and the improvement of food quality and of animal production. There is no research at all in fisheries and aquaculture, he said.

The interim report on the current framework programme, which will run until 1987, also talks of a serious imbalance between nuclear and non-nuclear objectives, and says that schemes for stimulating co-operation and interchange have been more "gradual" than expected.

The aim of the presentation was to start EEC research ministers thinking about their priorities for future Community research on the eve of the review of the framework programme, planned for the second half of 1985. That debate will be preceded by a comparison of national and Community scientific policies by the COPOL (Coordination of National Policies) group meeting in June 1985.

The Commission's own proposals for future areas of research include health care and technology, the management of energy resources, training, European cooperation, the mobility of researchers (inside and outside the Community) and the more effective use of scientific equipment. Moreover, the Forecasting and Assessment in Science and Technology Group, whose preliminary conclusions are due in mid-1985, wants more research of an economic character into companies and services.

Whether ministers will accept these proposals will depend not least on what they are prepared to spend on research out of the Community budget and their own resources. By March 1985, the activities of the current programme had cost 2,685 million European Currency Units (ECU, 1 ECU = £0.60) out of a total of 3,750 million ECU budgeted until 1987 — three per cent of the total Community budget. In 1984, ministers committed themselves to increase research funding. Both Jacques Delors, the president of the Commission, and Mr Narjes would like to see that figure doubled for the second framework programme covering 1988-1991/92.

The meeting in Rome also gave ministers

a foretaste of the agenda for the formal EEC research council scheduled for 4 June in Luxembourg.

● **Telecommunications research.** The European Commission is keen to get a speedy decision on its proposals for research in advanced communications in Europe (RJCE, see *Nature* 314, 209; 1985) but the United Kingdom, France and West Germany are sceptical, asking for a clear definition before embarking on research.

● **Tritium-handling laboratory.** To support the thermonuclear fusion programme, EEC has agreed to build a laboratory at the Joint Research Centre at Ispra in Italy, but Britain and France continue to doubt its siting and timeliness, given that the Next European Torus (NET), for which the tritium would be needed, will not be ready

## French research

# CNRS to concentrate resources

THE French national research council (CNRS) is to devote 40 per cent of its resources to twenty newly defined "strategic objectives", according to the CNRS 5-7 year plan published last week. The twenty disciplines include many fundamental subjects, such as nuclear and particle physics, but these are sometimes combined in significant new associations. Thus, the "sciences of the Universe" combine in one objective with particle and nuclear physics. Other objectives specify boundary-breaking explicitly, such as that named as "the interaction between and chemistry biology". It has long been a passion of the CNRS director Pierre Papon to forge unity among the highly divided disciplines in France; the CNRS council seems now to have given him the hammer and anvil he needs.

The new objectives also stress long-range applied science, such as Earth observation from satellites (in anticipation of the launch of the French SPOT satellite later this year), process engineering, biotechnology and so on, but Papon said last week that their selection is not a threat to the basic sciences. Many of them, he said, are in any case basic science and "it is not a major problem to defend basic science in France".

According to Papon, the real objective of the CNRS "list of 20" is "to unify science". He says he was struck, during a European tour last year, by the many links between chemistry and biology departments in Britain, whereas there is just one such department in France. Unification of disciplines is also more advanced in Sweden and Switzerland. Research in France is more fractured than elsewhere, though many modern scientific problems are multidisciplinary.

Mobility, both among disciplines and

until the 1990s, and that the site for that machine has not yet been chosen.

● **European Synchrotron Facility.** In exchange for its agreement to the proposed site at Grenoble, Denmark is seeking a marine research institute in its own country.

● **Initiative for Research in Informatics applied to Society (IRIS).** This proposal, put forward by the Italians in Rome, would encourage companies to develop new products and social services in fields such as medicine and agriculture. The proposal has been greeted with scepticism by the United Kingdom, but the Commission has agreed to a preliminary study.

Ministers also discussed proposals by the European Commission for greater control of state aid in the member states. Such control over national research programmes would be particularly unwelcome in countries such as the United Kingdom, France, West Germany and Italy.

Anna Lubinska

geographically, is poor, but Papon says CNRS is working with the ministry of research and technology to solve many purely administrative and practical obstacles, such as finding a job for a spouse. Last year there was a growth of some 15 per cent in the number of CNRS researchers moving into industry for a spell of three years or more. This might be "slow progress", but there is a "psychological problem" said Papon. Last year, one in two hundred CNRS staff made a move to industry. "It would be nice to double the figure."

Robert Walgate

## Areas of research

THE research areas that CNRS will now emphasize are:

- The universe, atomic nucleus and elementary particles (some of the costs of these disciplines are borne outside CNRS).
- Mathematics.
- Optics.
- Materials sciences.
- *Filière électronique* (science applied to the microelectronics industry).
- Plasma physics and nuclear fusion.
- Energy and thermodynamics.
- Process engineering.
- New methods in earth sciences.
- Dynamics of the ocean systems.
- Remote sensing.
- Continental water.
- Understanding chemical reactions.
- Chemistry-biology interaction.
- Biotechnology.
- Neurosciences.
- Sciences of evolution.
- Sciences of communication.
- Employment, work and technology.
- Urbanism, architecture and society.
- Large scientific equipment.