Framework deal boosts life sciences...

[MUNICH] Agreement was finally reached last week on financing for the European Union's long-debated fifth Framework programme of research (FP5). As a result, calls for proposals are expected to be issued in early spring, although money is not likely to reach researchers until the autumn, several months later than planned.

Programmes related to life sciences, training and mobility of researchers and industrial technologies have all emerged with more money than in the fourth Framework programme (FP4). But nuclear research and the EU's Joint Research Centre have fared comparatively badly.

The new programme will last from 1999 until 2002. The delay in its launch was due to the failure of the Council of Ministers and the European Parliament to agree on the level and mechanism of its financing.

Last week the two parties finally agreed to a total of ECU14.9 billion (US\$17.4 billion), an increase of 4.6 per cent over FP4. This includes ECU1.26 billion for nuclear research. The total is almost ECU1 billion more than the council said in February that it was prepared to pay, but is ECU1.74 billion below the budget the parliament wanted.

The agreement was welcomed by UK science minister Lord Sainsbury, who said: "The new budget provides a three per cent increase in real terms over the previous programme. This will be a significant stimulus to the wide ranging collaborative research that Europe needs to promote competitiveness and the quality of life."

Sainsbury: 'stimulus to competitiveness'.

The European Commission, which drew up the programme and is responsible for its execution, had suggested a budget of ECU16.3 billion.

The mechanism of FP5 financing was complicated by Spain's campaign to force member states to continue the programme of structural funds — EU subsidies to poor regions from which Spain greatly benefits — after 2000. The union is debating rule changes for the distribution of structural funds in anticipation of the extension of membership to several central European countries. Spain is using its power of veto on all EU decisions that require unanimity, including FP5, until the issue is resolved in its favour.

As a result, the Council of Ministers could only firmly agree on FP5 financing up to 2000. Parliament was unhappy with the need to reconfirm within 12 months financing of the subsequent three years of the pro-

...but nuclear work and fusion research lose out

[MUNICH] Clear losers in FP5 funding are the nuclear programme and the Joint Research Centre (JRC). The budget for nuclear research, which is organized under a separate Euratom treaty that is yet to be finally approved, has shrunk by six per cent. The JRC, whose eight institutes act as a European centre for science and technology services, sees its budget shrink by more than seven per cent.

The JRC has recently

embarked on a restructuring in response to continued criticisms from politicians that it had become inflexible and of uncertain scientific merit (see *Nature* **395**, 314; 1998).

The European Commission had wanted a zero-growth budget for the centre to allow it to continue on its new track. The final budget is considerably lower than what JRC director Herbert Algeier considers the minimum necessary to keep all its projects going.

Algeier is already discussing with the commission which of the non-nuclear projects will have to be dropped. He says it is already clear that the JRC's nuclear programme will have to abandon the work it does in support of the EU's nuclear fusion programme.

Algeier says that the work on decommissioning nuclear installations should be supported from another part of the union's general budget.

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gramme. But it conceded when clauses in the 'common position' with the council were reworded to state that parliament would decide jointly about subsequent financing with the council.

As the dust settles, the commission must now fill in the details of FP5's four thematic programmes and its three 'horizontal' programmes, which must be individually approved by the council, with advice from parliament. This less controversial aspect should be complete by February.

Comparisons between FP5 and FP4 in terms of financing and content are difficult because of the radically different way that FP5's programmes have been organized in a bid to concentrate funds more precisely on socially defined problems, known as key actions (see *Nature* **386**, 5; 1997).

But it is clear that life sciences have been given a boost, in line with EU policies to promote biotechnology and to make science serve social needs, such as the improvement of health and the environment.

The thematic programme 'Promoting competitive and sustainable growth', with its focus on industrial technologies, has also won more favour. This is partly a result of pressure from the richer countries which want the research to support the promotion of a European aeronautics industry.

The biggest winner is the horizontal programme 'Improving human potential', which is comparable to FP4's popular 'Training and mobility of researchers' programme in content, and has one third more money.

'Improving human potential' differs from its predecessor in its approach to individual fellowship grants. The postdoctoral fellowships, which allow young scientists to work in a second EU country for up to three years, will remain substantially unchanged, although the number of postdocs that can be funded will increase.

But the heavily oversubscribed three-year PhD fellowships will be modified to pay only travel costs of students wishing to spend 3–12 months of their studies abroad, in a laboratory approved by the commission.

A special scheme will be set up for industry which did not participate in FP4's 'Training and mobility of researchers' to the extent that the commission had hoped. This time industry will be able to define its own projects for three-year PhD fellowships and two-year postdoc fellowships, rather than only being able to accept individuals arriving with approved projects that could be out of line with that industry's mission. The commission will select industrial 'hosts' for researchers.

The commission's idea of selecting hosts is not new. It was introduced in FP3, where it failed because of the commission's slow administrative procedures. Its reintroduction in FP5 is a bit of an experiment, admit officials, but recent administrative improvements mean that fellowships could still be taken up as early as next autumn.

The 'Access to large scale facilities' programme within FP4's 'Training and mobility of researchers' becomes 'Enhancing access to research infrastructure' in FP5. The name change reflects the fact that the programme is able to support research services such as databases or special ecological habitats in addition to large facilities such as synchrotrons.

Scientists are waiting for the details of the programmes to be defined before giving final judgement on the merits of FP5 for basic research. The increase in budget for training researchers is a "very good sign", says Eigil Praestgaard, a professor of chemistry at Roskilde University in Denmark who was a member of the commission's science advisory body, ESTA. "But there remains a lot of grumbling about whether FP5 will be good for basic research when its research areas are so targeted."

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