Nuclear reactor safety

Europe takes stock of research proposals

Brussels

THE European Commission has been quick to prepare an alternative research programme to replace the ill-fated Super-Sara project on reactor safety based on the Joint Research Centre at Ispra in Italy. But the Commission's proposals are unexciting and uninspiring and must prompt questions about the usefulness of the Ispra establishment, the largest of the Community's four research centres. When the Community's ten science ministers decided to kill off Super-Sara a fortnight ago in Brussels (see *Nature* 17 February, p.554), they said that they would nevertheless maintain the original budget for Ispra. At a press conference to present the new proposals, however, there was no mistaking the anxiety of their chief architects, the Commission's director-general for research and development, Paolo Fasella, and the director-general of the Joint Research Centres, Jean-Albert Dinkespiller.

The new programme will be on the agenda for the next research council on 10 March, but a final decision is not expected until November. A host of consultative bodies, political as well as scientific, will again have to be consulted.

At stake is an annual budget averaging 174 million European Units of Account (£97 million) and a staff of 2,260. The new proposals would concentrate the work of the Joint Research Centres largely on various types of safety research of which between 45 and 50 per cent would be nuclear safety. This share of the budget is not very different from what it would have been if Super-Sara had gone ahead, for under the new proposals more would be spent on nuclear safety research other than Super-Sara. Thus some of the Ispra staff would evaluate the results of reactor safety experiments elsewhere, others would be engaged on putting the Essor reactor into mothballs and still others on theoretical studies of the effects of major external accidents. It is also proposed that work on the safety of fast reactors should be intensified, with the aim of producing at European safety code for nuclear reactors.

One new element in the research programme is the increase in the attention paid to non-nuclear safety research in fields such as acid rain, toxic wastes and industrial risk assessment.

In the long run, the best hope for Ispra is the proposal that it should have a role in fusion research. The ideal, that Ispra might become the site of the next big fusion experiment in Europe, is, however, partly undermined by the prospect that Ispra might become exactly what Dinkespiller

says he wants to avoid — "a juxtaposition of a large number of minor activities".

The reception these proposals get on 10 March will depend on the Italian delegation's position. The council's decision must be unanimous and the Italians are still unwilling to abandon Super-Sara. Whatever the wisdom of a last-ditch struggle at this stage, it has long been evidence to all concerned that the way in which Community research decisions are made needs to be reformed.

Fortunately there is a prospect that this may happen. A paper prepared for the next council meeting proposes that several consultative committees should be scrapped and replaced by one super-committee that would free ministers from the need to discuss the details of the research budget every year. It is also proposed that the Joint Research Centres should be supervised on a day to day basis by a governing board reporting to an administrative council. Sir John (J.B.) Adams, now president of the administrative council, has already been nominated as president of the governing board.

Jasper Becker

Jobs for biochemists

THE Federation of European Biochemical Societies (FEBS) plans to take a leaf out of the book of the large US societies and to organize a job-placement bureau at its annual conference this year in Brussels, from 24 to 29 July. Professor Claude Liébecq, chairman of the organizing committee, says the best way the federation can help young biochemists is to find them jobs.

The venture is a new departure for Europe, but the federation hopes to obtain some valuable assistance from the Federation for American Societies for Experimental Biology, at whose annual conferences the job mart has long been conspicuous.

Liébecq is optimistic about the new scheme. On the telephone this week, he explained that many European companies in need of particular specialist help are unable to recruit scientists from local universities and would be prepared to look elsewhere.

At the same time, it is acknowledged that language problems will be an impediment to recruitment, as will the requirement even in some European Community states that employees should always be nationals. Those seeking to use the new service in July, whether potential employers or employees, should write to the organizers of the 15th FEBS conference, Brussels International Conference Centre, Parc des Expositions, Place de Belgique, B-1020 Brussels, Belgium. □

Scripps clinic

Bloom migrates from Salk

FLOYD BLOOM, one of the most visible of American neuroscientists, is to move closer to Mexico, baby powder and molecular biology. By the end of this year, he will have moved south along the California coast from the Salk Institute to the Scripps Clinic and Research Institute, which has a collaborative agreement with Johnson & Johnson, where he will more easily be able to pursue the molecular approach to the brain that he and Dr Richard Lerner of Scripps have jointly developed over the past three years.

Citing that as one reason for his move, Bloom said it would also be a move back towards the patient. Although he has no plans to reactivate his own medical licence, he is eager to have access to clinical material and the chance to contribute towards the treatment of mental illness and alcoholism. Johnson & Johnson whose net income for the last quarter of 1982 was \$79.4 million — a 10.5 per cent fall on 1981, attributed to the problems of poisoned Tylenol — has recently ploughed at least \$20 million into Scripps in exchange for first rights to any discoveries made there.

Researchers at Scripps have to allow Johnson & Johnson 30 days to peruse papers before they are submitted for publication, for which purpose a number of company employees work within the institute. Johnson & Johnson is also soon to have separate laboratories nearby which will be specifically used to develop Scripps discoveries to the point where their commercial potential can be judged.

One price that Bloom will have to pay for becoming party to the Scripps tie-up with Johnson & Johnson is an exclusive consultancy he has held with Merck, Sharp and Dohme. One that he is unlikely to have to pay, since he expects it to move with him, is the large grant, just renewed for five years, that the National Institute for Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism gave his laboratory as a designated Alcohol Research Centre.

Bloom hopes to continue that project, still in collaboration with Dr Wylie Vale's group at the Salk Institute. But the main focus of his work at Scripps will be "a comprehensive search strategy to reveal the whole of the gene library that codes for specific neuronal secretory products". It is on that project that Bloom has already collaborated with Richard Lerner, the recent beneficiary of a new department of molecular biology which by this summer will be housed in new buildings paid for by Johnson & Johnson. It was primarily for Lerner's expertise in the development of peptide vaccines that the company invested in the institute; already there is good progress towards a peptide vaccine against hepatitis B and foot and mouth disease.

Peter Newmark