

## Political deadlock delays promised German research cash

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Germany's top science manager is urging the federal and state governments to go ahead with two funding programmes that have been grounded by a political impasse.

"Science in Germany has become a hostage of a political power game," Ernst-Ludwig Winnacker, the president of the DFG, Germany's main funding agency for basic research, told *Nature*. "We've got to get out of this unprecedented deadlock."

The programmes consist of a €2-billion (US\$2.6-billion) scheme to create several elite universities and a separate 'pact for research' that would guarantee 3% annual budget increases until 2010 for the Max Planck Society and other large non-university research bodies.

The projects have been frozen since December, when the planned reform of the relationship between Germany's federal government in Berlin and its 16 *Länder* (states) fell apart. The plan failed largely because the Social Democrat-led government and the Christian Democrats, who control most of the *Länder*, disagreed about who should have power over science and education. Science experts from the federal government and the *Länder* are now discussing the possibility of going ahead with the programmes anyway.

"Science has without doubt climbed up the political agenda in Germany," says Winnacker. "Unfortunately, this appears to have caused more harm than good."

The impasse is hurting Germany's universities, which carry out four-fifths of the country's publicly funded research. In January last year, Edelgard Bulmahn, the science minister, promised to award a small group of elite universities an extra €390 million each year for five years from 2006 (see *Nature* 427, 477; 2004).

Now candidate institutions are growing impatient as they await confirmation that the money will be released. Patrick Cramer, for example, a structural biologist and managing director of the University of Munich's Gene Centre, says he needs the money to attract top researchers. "We cannot yet compete with the best groups in the United States in terms of equipment," he says.

Although an end to the impasse is currently not in sight, Winnacker remains optimistic that sooner or later the promised money will flow. Disagreement over who should distribute the extra money, and how, should not threaten the programmes as a whole, he says. ■



Graham Watkins' appointment could ease tensions for researchers at the Charles Darwin Foundation.

## Hopes rise as head named for troubled conservation centre

Henry Nicholls

Ecologist Graham Watkins has been named executive director of the Charles Darwin Foundation (CDF), the scientific authority in the Galapagos archipelago. Observers hope he will bring some much-needed stability to the islands' conservation effort.

The past decade has been difficult for scientists in the Galapagos, as pressures on its natural resources have become intense. Oil spills, hunting and fishing have all taken their toll — and researchers say that fishermen, frustrated by quotas, have made death threats against them, seized research buildings and forced some facilities to close (see *Nature* 408, 761; 2000). Despite this, the cluster of islands off the coast of Ecuador remain of intense interest to researchers studying evolution, as they have done since Charles Darwin's visit on the *Beagle* 170 years ago.

The situation has not been helped by problems within the foundation in recent years. "There was a general loss of confidence in its leadership," says Nigel Sitwell, chairman of the Galapagos Conservation Trust, the UK-based charity that raises money for conservation in the islands. The board of directors was completely remodelled in January 2004, he says, and the foundation has been held together by an acting director since then. "Strong leadership and fresh ideas should help to ease the current tensions," says Sitwell.

Watkins was due to take up office in the Charles Darwin Research Station on

1 February, returning to the islands where he was a tourist guide in the 1980s. "The islands have left an indelible mark in my mind," he says. Watkins comes from a two-year post as director-general of the Iwokrama International Centre for Rain Forest Conservation and Development in central Guyana.

Part of Watkins' remit will be to secure more money for Galapagos conservation. But the first major challenge, he says, will be to strengthen the dialogue between the CDF and the Galapagos National Park Service, fishermen, naturalist guides and the tourism industry. In particular, the partnership between the CDF and its sister body, the national park service, is crucial, he says.

But the national park service has troubles of its own. Since 2002, leadership of the park service, appointed by the Ecuadorean government, has changed hands about eight times. Last September, wardens went on strike to protest against the latest incumbent, Fausto Cepeda, saying that he had ties with the fishing industry. The park service is still awaiting the outcome of an independent selection process to find a new director.

Sitwell says that Watkins' appointment to run the CDF is a step in the right direction. "The Galapagos is one of the most important protected areas in the world," says Watkins. "Its conservation and effective management are critical not only to its own future but as a model for other protected areas." ■