

THIS WEEK

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Redirection home

Europe's researchers should grab every opportunity to ensure that funds redirected towards strategic investment will not miss science altogether.

The almost 19,000 followers of @EU_H2020 — the official Twitter feed of the European Union's flagship funding scheme Horizon 2020 — have already had much to discuss this year. Highlights include plans being drawn up by research commissioner Carlos Moedas on how to manage scientific advice after the abrupt axing of the chief adviser post held by Anne Glover; a live stream of a green-transport event; and the announcement of the first grants, including cash for projects to work on robots that wash floors and harvest sweet peppers.

However, @EU_H2020 has been quiet on a move by commission president Jean-Claude Juncker to raid the Horizon 2020 budget for money to help set up a continent-wide investment fund. The floor-washing robots are safe: Juncker wants to drain the cash — some €2.7 billion (US\$3.1 billion) — from other parts of the budget, details of which were announced through more traditional routes last month.

Hardest hit is the European Institute of Innovation & Technology in Budapest, which will lose €350 million over the next six years. The European Research Council will lose €221 million, starting next year.

Also targeted is cash earmarked for projects across the continent over the coming years, including from information and communications technology, which will lose €307 million, food (€181 million) and nanotechnology, biotechnology and other advanced manufacturing techniques (€169 million).

If Juncker's proposal is approved by the European Parliament and Council, then the €2.7 billion will form part of a €16-billion European Fund for Strategic Investments that the European Commission hopes will stimulate state and private investment and lift the continent's stagnant economy.

@EU_H2020 might have been quiet on the move, but there have been howls of protest from those on the receiving end of the cuts.

"Horizon 2020 is not a lemon! Stop squeezing it!" was the sharp response from the League of European Research Universities in Leuven, Belgium, when the cuts were first suggested last year. And the advocacy group EuroScience said that it "is not in principle against using a small part of the Horizon 2020 budget for this purpose", but that taking the money from the European Research Council sent "a very bad signal". The European Research Area's Stakeholders Platform, an umbrella group of various organizations expressed "great concern" and warned that the cuts would undermine research and innovation efforts across Europe.

In response, European Commission officials say that the cuts come from an already generous budget — the original €80 billion in spending planned through Horizon 2020 makes it the most lucrative research funding scheme of its type in the world. The €2.7-billion reduction, they point out, could have been worse, and leaves the bulk of the programme intact. They argue that the funds will not truly be lost from science and research; they will return with interest when the strategic fund begins to bear economic fruit.

Perhaps. But it is easy to have sympathy for the organizations that were

banking on that money and must now try to fill the hole. It is also easy to question the use of the word 'strategic' in the title of the fund. Strategy is long-term, and the best and most enduring route to prosperity must remain the careful allocation of investment to research on science and technology — both pure and applied.

Still, as *Nature* has argued before, scientists must accept that the boom times are over, at least for now. Money is tight and priorities are shifting. Those in Europe would do well to remember that.

"Scientists must lobby for research and innovation to have a central role."

The new fund could be up and running as soon as September, so some scientists could still be waiting to hear whether they will join the pepper-picking robot researchers in receiving a Horizon 2020 grant (chances are, they won't, the programme is massively oversubscribed, sorry). In principle, research could yet benefit from the redirected money, but scientists and their representatives must lobby for research and innovation to have a central role in the projects — infrastructure and the rest — in which the new fund will invest. The European Research Area's Stakeholders Platform has suggested amendments to the proposed legislation to make that happen, including giving researchers a say in how the money is allocated, and European officials should listen to that advice.

Science may have lost out on the money, but it should not miss out on the opportunity. ■

House of cards

Western institutions must speak out against human-rights abuses in their partner countries.

When the leaders of many of the world's democracies flocked to Saudi Arabia last week to offer their condolences on the death of King Abdullah, many critics called it hypocrisy. They did so, too, when Saudi officials marched in Paris two weeks earlier to defend freedom of expression following the terrorist attacks there.

After all, Saudi Arabia comes near the bottom of the world league in terms of freedoms, such as the right to dissent, to freedom of expression or to practise any religion other than Islam, and has a track record of brutal human-rights abuses and political and religious oppression. But the kingdom's oil and strategic geopolitical importance in the turbulent Middle East means that it has long enjoyed strong ties with the West.

Some scientists have been drawn to the desert state too, not least to the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST) in