

Controversial head of French agricultural agency speaks out

Philippe Mauguin discusses the balance between basic and applied research, a return to GM crops — and how scientists have settled down since his appointment.

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Philippe Mauguin, the director of the French National Institute of Agricultural Research (INRA).

Philippe Mauguin's appointment in July as president and chief executive of France's [National Institute for Agricultural Research \(INRA\)](#) sparked [widespread protest among researchers](#). Major French research agencies are usually headed by scientists — and Mauguin, an agronomic engineer and former chief of staff to France's agriculture minister, was seen as a political appointee.

In his first interview with an English-language publication since taking the helm of INRA, Mauguin tells *Nature* how he has responded to scientists' concerns and outlines his strategy for the future of the agency, which has an annual budget of nearly €900 million (US\$980 million) and employs some 8,165 permanent staff including 1,850 full-time researchers.

What are your priorities for INRA — and how do you think the institute should change?

INRA was created in 1946 to help feed France after the Second World War, and its focus was on agriculture alone. Some 70 years on, things are different: we need to focus on global food security, combating climate change, fighting disease, ensuring a balanced use of bioresources and developing agro-ecology (efforts to make agricultural production ecologically sustainable).

On 13 October, the board of directors adopted a programme for 2016–25. The proposals build on the programme drawn up a year ago, but detail priority themes and add action plans. The plans include forging stronger links between INRA labs and universities and increasing co-publications with the best international labs. They also include establishing collaborative socio-economic partnerships by the end of 2017 for our innovation goals, which include using sensors to improve livestock farming, and protecting crops with living organisms and natural substances.

Scientists are concerned that there will be less 'basic' research at INRA and more applied innovation. How do you respond to them?

I believe there is zero risk of this happening. In fact, in view of today's strong international competition, the greater risk would be for a swing towards basic research to build on our traditional scientific strengths. We need to avoid this as it would mean we would become disconnected from society and be unable to fulfil our goals.

Scientific excellence and our partnership with society are interdependent and must never be seen in opposition. That being said, INRA is and always will be a research institute. It is essential to maintain the balance between producing knowledge, supporting public policy and working with socio-economic players and citizens. In my very first exchanges with representatives of INRA staff, I confirmed my commitment to maintaining the balance between curiosity-driven research and mission-driven research at INRA.

What is that balance?

I don't believe this can be quantified. Most important is to make sure that basic research leads to innovation, which is not a task scientists should have to undertake themselves. This is why we plan to have one or two business developers and knowledge brokers for each of our 20 innovation priorities, whose job will be to identify how and where new discoveries can be applied.

INRA stopped research on genetically modified (GM) organisms in 2013. Do you have any plans to revive this?

INRA no longer has any experimental GM crops out in the field. However, I would like researchers to be able to work freely on plant and animal biotechnologies, and could not imagine a large public research institute specialized in food systems being absent from this area forever, especially given the questions raised by these techniques in society. We have no plans to resume such work for the moment, but I expect when the European Union has adopted new regulations, we will seek authorization for greenhouse or field experiments partly based on genome editing.

How do INRA researchers see you now? Do you still face opposition?

I don't think there is much opposition now. After taking office, I shared my proposals for INRA's future with the scientific management staff. They have been very well received. I have also started making the rounds of INRA's 17 centres and will have seen them all by March 2017. I took up the post in a positive frame of mind, particularly as I think there had been a lot of misunderstanding. I may not be a scientist, but I began my career at the research ministry 30 years ago, and have worked with researchers in the agronomic and food area ever since.

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