

Brussels rewrites mission of 'Eurolabs'

[MUNICH] Europe's much criticized Joint Research Centre (JRC) was relaunched this week. Its new mission is explicitly to support European Union (EU) policies and meet the needs of European citizens.

The JRC brings together seven institutes, including 15 centres and reference laboratories, and acts as an EU reference centre for science and technology. Its largest site, at Ispra in northern Italy, hosts the Institute for Advanced Materials; the Institute for Systems, Informatics and Safety; the Space Applications Institute; and the Environment Institute. The Institute for Reference Materials and Measurements is in Geel, Belgium; the Institute for Transuranium Elements is in Germany; and the Institute for Prospective Technological Studies in Seville, Spain. The institutes employ 1,820 staff, 80 per cent of whom are scientists or engineers.

The new mission statement, which reflects the European Commission's (EC) more socially orientated fifth framework programme of research (FP5), due to start next year, is a response to criticisms that the JRC had become inefficient, expensive and of uncertain scientific merit.

It is accompanied by a planned rationalization of its over-diversified scientific and technological programmes, and follows a recent decision to hire more temporary staff in order to increase its flexibility.

The JRC — founded in the late 1950s as a centre for the development of nuclear power — suffered when nuclear power fell from political favour in the 1980s. In the absence of a clear post-nuclear mission, the number of add-on units grew in an undirected way.

During the past few years the JRC has

worked hard to bring its house in order. This follows a decision made in 1993 by the Council of Ministers, following a drive led by Britain and Germany, that the JRC should obtain a significant part of its budget through competition. In fact the JRC has more or less reached the targets set in the fourth framework programme (1994–1998) — 22 per cent competitive money for its non-nuclear programme and 15 per cent for its nuclear programme.

In future the centres will have only 40 per cent permanent staff, with 35 per cent on renewable five-year contracts and 25 per cent on three-year non-renewable contracts. Many staff hired in the 1960s are starting to retire, making this target feasible in the next ten years. Over 200 new staff were hired last year, all but seven on temporary contracts.

Herbert Allgeier, who directs the JRC's advanced technology programme, was brought in as director general in February to implement the organizational changes. "The JRC must be reconfirmed as an integral part of EU policy-making — and not apologetically defended," he says.

Allgeier intends to start decommissioning research reactors which have not operated for many years. He also plans to bring some of the Environment Institute's units (relating to food and drink quality, control of chemicals and development of alternatives to animal research) into a new Institute for Health and Consumer Protection. "Institutes were involved in too many different tasks," says Allgeier. "Their tasks will now be rationalized to fit the new mission."

New tasks, such as the validation of methods developed to detect genetically modified

organisms (GMOs) in foods, will be added to the list of tasks. Elke Anklam, who heads the JRC's unit for food safety and pioneered the new GMO studies, believes that the reorganization will help to make the JRC serve the EU's aims more efficiently.

The commission is keen that the JRC should maintain its budget for 1999–2002. This is currently under negotiation between the European Parliament, which shares the EC's view, and the Council of Ministers, representing the member states, which wants to reduce it by at least 15 per cent.

"If the council position wins through we will have to close down an entire institute," says Allgeier. All technical support to the European fusion programme will have to be stopped, he says, in addition to other important programmes.

The council and the parliament are also discussing the level of funds the JRC should be asked to raise from outside sources, a matter of considerable controversy. Parliament, as well as the commission and some member states, sees a contradiction between the role of the JRC as an institution at the service of the commission and the demand that it should find money to pay for this service from elsewhere. In order to meet targets in FP4, some JRC institutes had felt under pressure to become involved in projects that would fit criteria for external grants even though they were not necessarily central to their mission, says Allgeier.

He welcomes the continued demand for the JRC to win some of its budget through competitive grants because of the advantages it brings through networking with national research institutes. "But it is nonsense to say we must do it to increase our budget," he says.

This is also the position of Parliament. But Parliament disagrees with Allgeier's proposal, discussed by the JRC's board of governors in Seville this week, to restrict the role of the board to strategic and scientific advice, and monitoring of the institutes.

Allgeier is unhappy with the board's involvement in what he describes as "micro-management". But Eryl McNally, a socialist member of the European Parliament from the UK who is on the Parliament's research committee, says that the board should be involved in detailed management because it needs to be able to follow procedures actively to make recommendations about funding.

The board will also discuss a proposed change in methods of evaluating institutes. The commission would like to be controlled by the individual directorates in Brussels which ask for particular bits of work. A spokesman says that evaluation should not focus on counting publications and patents, but on the efficiency with which contracted work is carried out.

Alison Abbott

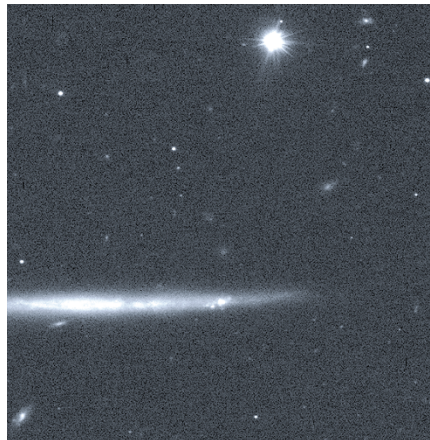
New Chile observatory shows its mettle

[MUNICH] The European Southern Observatory (ESO) has released new pictures of ESO342 – G017, a spiral galaxy outside the Milky Way in the southern constellation of Sagittarius, 400 million light years from Earth.

They are among the first observations from ESO's 8.2-metre Very Large Telescope on Mount Paranal in Chile. More distant galaxies can be seen in the background (right). The brighter parts of the flat disk are believed to be star-forming regions.

The release of the pictures, taken last month, coincided with a meeting of the observatory's governing council last week that formally approved ESO's involvement in a new international large millimetre astronomy observatory in the southern hemisphere (see *Nature* 388, 412; 1997).

The new Large Southern Array/Millimetre Array will merge European and



US plans for a large millimetre array and should cut costs to about US\$350 million. It will provide a millimetre counterpart to the Very Large Telescope and the NASA/ESA Hubble Space Telescope.

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