

French researchers reject reform plans...

[PARIS] Researchers at the France's Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS), Europe's largest fundamental research agency, have rejected proposals to slash the size of the body that evaluates its laboratories and administers recruitment.

The recommendations that the national committee of the CNRS should be drastically reduced in size were made by Claude Allègre, French minister of national education, research and technology. The committee, which also plays a major role in shaping CNRS's research priorities, comprises about 40 sections covering various disciplines, each made up of scientists from the research agencies and universities.

Allègre wants to halve the number of sections as part of his plans to reduce bureaucracy in French science (see *Nature* 388, 7; 1997).

But many scientists have argued that a much reduced national committee would lack the manpower and expertise to carry out evaluation properly.

A recent report commissioned by CNRS from Jean Pailhous, a CNRS researcher at the Université Aix-Marseille 2, also recommended that the sections only be reduced to 36 (see *Nature* 392, 8; 1998). This view gains strong support from the results of a three-month consultation at CNRS, which is due to be released shortly.

It shows that three-quarters of all CNRS laboratory directors oppose any large reduction in the number of sections in the committee, with only 10 per cent supporting such a move. Similarly, 81 per cent oppose a reduction in the number of members in each section.

A narrow majority — 54 per cent — agreed that CNRS's seven departments should play a larger role in running the agency. A further 30 per cent who opposed this said they would accept it if assurances were given that the departments would base their strategic thinking on that of the national committee.

The result confirms the profound attach-

ment of CNRS researchers to the national committee, which is unique in that two-thirds of its members are elected directly by the scientific community. Indeed, most researchers want the current balance of elected scientists to be maintained, with only 2 per cent of those questioned supporting a reduction of this proportion to less than 50 per cent.

One member of the CNRS administrative council predicts that, given this broad resistance, Allègre is unlikely to be able to proceed with his proposed reforms. A clearer idea of what, if any, reforms of the committee are envisaged should emerge in two weeks' time when the CNRS administrative council itself is due to propose a series of reforms for the agency.

The main change is likely to be a re-inforcement of the role of the administrative council in strategic planning, in particular by

being involved from the outset in preparing reforms and decisions.

Although the board votes on the budget and other strategic issues, at present its role is largely restricted to rubber-stamping proposals from the director-general. But Allègre is keen that administrative councils should play a real role in setting strategy at all the research agencies, including the medical research agency INSERM (see below), and that the director-generals should be more concerned with day-to-day management.

Meanwhile, the scientific trade unions, having gained the scientific community's backing in their opposition to Allègre's proposals to dismantle the national committee, now seem to be supporting other changes to reduce bureaucracy, increase international input in evaluation and encourage multi-disciplinarity.

Declan Butler

...as medical agency agrees to a compromise

[PARIS] Extensive negotiations over reform at the French national biomedical research agency have ended with the adoption of a text reflecting last-minute concessions to trade unions representing the agency's researchers. The planned reform to the statutes of the agency, INSERM, is intended to streamline its internal decision-making.

The trade unions say they remain unhappy about the final text adopted by the agency's administrative council, which they claim will increase political control over INSERM (see *Nature* 391, 110; 1998) by increasing the power of this council, but that the last-minute

concessions won have eased their major concerns.

The government had already abandoned the most controversial elements of the decree — such as splitting INSERM into five departments — following opposition from researchers.

But the modified reform text was nonetheless rejected by staff union representatives last month. They claimed management had given insufficient assurances on the scope of new powers given to the administrative council to make strategic decisions on research directions and funding.

Such decisions were previously reached through

agreement by the scientific community and INSERM management, and the unions argued that assurances were needed over the continued role of INSERM's scientific commissions in decision-making.

The administrative council has bowed to these demands, and the adopted text restricts the council's role to deciding on the 'broad lines' of policy, staff and budgetary decisions. Also, the scientific committees must be consulted not only on the creation, modification or abolition of programmes, but also on the financing of individual INSERM laboratories.

D. B.

Harvard's 'oncomouse' fails to win Canadian patent

[MONTREAL] A Canadian federal court judge has ruled that Harvard University's 'oncomouse', which was genetically engineered to be susceptible to cancers, and the rights to which are now owned by DuPont, is not patentable in Canada.

After receiving a US patent on both the biotechnology process used to 'create' the oncomouse and on the mouse itself, Harvard's president and university fellows had applied for a Canadian patent — the

first such patent sought in this country for a mammal.

The patent office had accepted the claim for the genetic engineering process, but it rejected the claim on the mammal itself. Harvard appealed to Canada's federal court. But Judge Marc Nadon has dismissed the appeal, saying: "They have created a method to inject eggs with a *myc* gene but they have not invented the mouse."

Nadon said that parliament could alter legislation so that mammals can be patented

if it wishes. But he said that he was not prepared to manipulate the meaning of the words of the Patent Act to the degree currently necessary to do so.

Michelle Swenarchuck, counsel and director of international programmes at the Canadian Environmental Law Association, says: "Justice Nadon has correctly placed this matter at the door of elected officials." Harvard is expected to appeal against the judge's ruling, taking the issue to Canada's supreme court if necessary. David Spurgeon