European biotechnology

Community seeks new funds

Copenhagen

THE Governments of Austria, Switzerland and Sweden have asked the European Commission if they may join in the European Economic Community's next biotechnology programme, even though none of them belongs. The decision rests with the European Council of Ministers but the signs are that the applicants will be refused.

If so, this would be an inauspicious start to the 154-million-ECU (£130 million) five-year programme, which has as yet not an ECU (European currency unit) to call its own. The research plan, called the "Research Action Programme" (RAP) in biotechnology, has been conceived as a development and sixfold amplification of an existing Community biotechnology programme devoted to agriculture and food, the "Biomolecular Engineering Programme" (BEP). BEP has had "a tremendous impact" on developing collaboration among European research groups in plant sciences, said one senior participant speaking at a meeting last week to take stock of the programme.

Others, however, claim that while BEP has certainly been good for Europe, its benefits — new collaborations — will fade away when BEP ends (in March 1986) unless new funds are found to pay the costs of travel, meetings, training and materials now supported under BEP. Participants point to an earlier successful programme on photosynthesis, which collapsed when the programme finished.

One of the successes claimed for BEP last week is that work on the mitochondrial DNA of plants is now more advanced in Europe than elsewhere, partly as a result of the collaborations that have been supported. Without claiming sole credit, officials were gratified last week to hear from Professor Jeff Schell and his colleague Professor Marc van Montagu that *Agrobacterium* plasmids can be cloned into a monocotyledonous plant, *Asparagus officinalis*.

It seems to be agreed that BEP is responsible for the stimulation of *Agrobacterium* research in Europe and for establishing joint research programmes between groups that would otherwise have been working independently and in duplication. "The money has been better spent than it would have been in separate national programmes", said one participant.

BEP and, by extension, its successor, is not, however, without critics. Professor Schell, of Cologne and Ghent, doyen of the *Agrobacterium* vector for introducing foreign genes into plants, considered that the funds available (15 million ECU from Brussels) have been too thinly spread, but fears that if there were a massive increase in the budget, the money might be wasted among the undeserving masses.

Commission officials say, however, that

the objectives of the new programme are different, and that in the plant sciences, the best groups and programmes have already been identified. RAP would develop the programme, but also support initiatives in bioreactor technology (in particular for multi-enzyme, multi-phase and co-factor-requiring reactions), vaccines, hormones, gene transfer in animals, microbiology, the methodology of animal cell cultures (for monoclonal antibodies), new methods for

toxicological testing and other fields of "basic, pre-competitive" research.

Whether funds for the new programme will materialize is, however, still an open question. France, West Germany and the United Kingdom are objecting to the cost, even though all governments gave outline approval last April. Now the European Commission is trying to persuade ministers to open their purses by quoting the poor opinion of European biotechnology expressed by the US congressional Office of Technology Assessment, published in January this year (see *Nature* 307, 402; 1984).

Robert Walgate

Danish collaboration

Europe seems long way south

Copenhagen

THE Danish minister for education and science, Mr Bertel Haarder, is to make a strong protest at the next European council of research ministers at the way in which France and Germany appear to have decided between themselves where to put the proposed European Synchrotron Radiation Source (see *Nature* 4 October, p.399), trading a trans-sonic wind tunnel for Cologne against the ESRS for Strasbourg or Grenoble.

Denmark had offered to site ESRS at the Risø atomic research centre, and had offered Dkr 350 million (£25 million) to help pay for it. But now Denmark feels its proposal was not properly assessed.

"We are very very upset", said Professor Teder Olesen Larsen, chairman of the Danish advisory council for science policy, last week. As well as Haarder's protest in Brussels, Denmark is to raise the issue at the annual general meeting of the European Science Foundation (ESF) in Strasbourg in November.

The ESRS project has been managed by ESF since 1979, and site proposals should have been assessed and compared by an ESF technical committee. In Denmark, it is now felt that this scientific assessment never took place, or at least was not taken seriously. A detailed Risø proposal has still not received a reply said Olesen Larsen.

The Risø proposal is generally believed in Denmark to have been technically excellent, and to have had a good chance of success if purely scientific criteria had been involved. "We would be very disappointed if a decision was reached by Franco-German agreement", said Olesen Larsen. "We are not going to be dictated to in that way." The French research minister, Hubert Curien "has a responsibility" at the very least to put the Franco-German proposal before the ESRS technical committee. If nothing is done to heal wounds there could be "very strong and nearly disastrous consequences for ESF", Olesen Larsen said.

According to Professor Alan Mackintosh, an ex-director of Risø now at the University of Copenhagen, Denmark

has a good record in synchrotron radiation research. Indeed, the latest design of ESRS was coordinated by a Dane, Professor Bronislav Buras, at the European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN) near Geneva. The Nordic countries are also dismayed that they have never had a major European research facility (except the ionospheric laboratory, EISCAT). The complainants are, however, more reticent about the urgent domestic case for Risø as a site. It is one of those big laboratories originally devoted to nuclear research that needs to find new goals. ESRS would have suited it very nicely.

Risø's problems have been sharpened by the tacit Danish Government decision to abandon all hope of developing nuclear power stations in the light of the recent vote by the Social Democratic Party (SDP) (now opposing the centre-right coalition government) against nuclear power. Taking SDP together with the centre ("Radical") party, there is probably now a majority in the Danish Parliament against all nuclear development. For the first time in years, the Danish Prime Minister failed to refer to a nuclear future for Denmark in the opening speech to Parliament this month.

Another question-mark to place against Danish interest in ESRS could be the Danish commitment to another European institution, the European Molecular Biology Laboratory (EMBL) at Heidelberg. Denmark has kept its continued membership of EMBL in doubt now for three years — and that doubt will continue if Olesen Larsen's science policy committee has its way. A committee of biologists had recommended in August that Denmark should finally announce its long-term confidence in and commitment to EMBL, which costs the country Dkr 3 million (£210,000) a year; but the committee has rejected that advice, and instead advised Minister Haarder to leave the matter open for another three years — and meanwhile encourage more Danish molecular biologists to use the laboratory. Haarder has yet to decide which advice to take.

Robert Walgate