European Community

Programmes hanging fire

Brussels

THE fate of eight European Community long-term research and development programmes still remains unresolved after the Research Council meeting on 6 November.

This was the third attempt to take a decision on certain projects, such as the radiation protection training programme, biotechnology and non-nuclear energy, whose second research and development programme expired almost eighteen months ago.

Part of the problem has been the lack of a decision on the UK rebate, now provisionally resolved. Also, a large share of the 1985 research budget has already been approved for the Esprit (144.5 million European Currency Units (ECU); 1 ECU = £0.60) and Joint Research Centre (215.5 million ECU) programmes, which are favoured by the larger countries of the Community, the United Kingdom, West Germany and France, which have also proposed cuts in funds for the smaller sectoral programmes. This has left about 150 million ECU for 1985 to be shared out among the other programmes.

These constraints mean that some of the programmes have to be whittled down or phased in gradually. The question is which ones? Little progress appears to have been made on the positions held by the ministers as they prepared to discuss the issue at their meeting. The following are the programmes involved.

- Multiannual training and research in the field of radiation protection. The European Commission's original proposal of 93.4 million ECU for 1985–89 could be reduced by a third.
- Fundamental technological research aimed at promoting industrial competitiveness in industries other than high technology (known as the BRITE programme). The Commission proposed 170 million ECU for this programme, but the United Kingdom and West Germany want a smaller sum.
- Stimulation of cooperation and exchanges in the field of scientific and technological research, for which the commission has proposed 40 million ECU for 1985–88.
- Biotechnology, for which the commission originally proposed 88.52 million ECU. This programme originally had the backing of the French but more recently both France and the United Kingdom have proposed a reduction.
- Non-nuclear energy involving the further development of solar energy, biomass, wind energy, geothermal energy, energy saving and the use of solid fuels and possibly research in the field of hydrocarbons. Unlike the smaller countries, the United Kingdom, France and West Germany want a considerable reduction in the proposed commission budget of 379 million ECU for 1984–87.
- Reactor safety, consisting of a number of cost-shared projects to which the Community would, according to the Commission, contribute 24.9 million ECU over four years.
- Nuclear fusion, for which the Commission had proposed 790 million ECU over five years. This includes funds for the Joint European Torus at Culham in the United Kingdom and the setting up of a tritium-handling laboratory.
- Radioactive waste management programme to continue work under the current programme which expires at the end of the year. Ninety-two million ECU have been proposed by the Commission for this programme but, as in the case of radiation protection and reactor safety, no funds have been earmarked in the draft 1985 budget pending the adoption of detailed proposals.

Although no decisions were made on 6 November, research and development commissioner Vicomte Etienne Davignon managed to extract a commitment from ministers to come to an agreement by the next scheduled research council on 19 December. The decisions taken by the budget council on 29 November may make matters clearer by then.

The council has also become involved in the debate over the controversial siting of the European Synchrotron Radiation Source (ESRS) at Grenoble which Germany and France had agreed together (see *Nature* 25 October, p.695 and 1 November, p.3).

Although the Community is not directly concerned, Denmark insisted on a discussion at Community level, at which point Italian research minister Luigi Granelli declared that Trieste was also interested in ESRS, and that ties with Yugoslavia would provide a useful link with an "outsider" country.

The issue will appear on the agenda of the next research council, by which time the report of the standing committee should be ready. In the meantime the European Commission will also consider the possible involvement of the Community in ESRS.

Vicomte Davignon also presented research ministers with a project for intergovernmental videocommunications, originally proposed by the French in February. The link-up on a bilateral basis of Frankfurt, London, the Hague and Rome with Paris was to be tested this week. The first demonstration will be followed by a second link-up between the heads of state attending the European Council in 1985 and their advisers and cabinet ministers back home. The Commission intends to make a proposal to the council on the implementation and funding of the videocommunications programme at the beginning of next year.

Anna Lubinska

Europe

Cooperation needed

Brussels

IN addition to trying to encourage "solidarity" among governments of the European Community, research and development commissioner Vicomte Etienne Davignon was last week exhorting industry and researchers in Europe to cooperate more in the research and development of new technologies rather than continue on the path of "technological nationalism".

He was addressing a conference organized by the Community's economic and social committee aimed at bringing together for the first time all the sectors affected by the introduction of three new technologies: automation, information technologies and biotechnology.

Predictions for information technology and biotechnology are ambitious. Biotechnology, according to US consultants, could have a world market worth $27,000 million by 1990, while information technology could be worth $500,000. Meanwhile, the Community's trade deficit in information technology almost doubled between 1979 and 1982, reaching $15,000 million.

Europe has a world market share of 10 per cent in the information technology field and only a 40 per cent share of its own market. But intra-European, interdisciplinary and industry/research cooperation could change that. The conference, which included trade union representatives, voiced concern about the impact on jobs of the introduction of new technologies.

Because there would be job losses, more training and retraining would be necessary, although the present unemployment problem was not blamed on the introduction of new technologies to any great extent. While it was mostly believed that new technologies would only provide a small percentage of the new jobs required, Umberto Colombo, president of the Codest committee and chairman of the Ente Nazionale di Energie Alternative, said that a study by the European Nuclear Energy Agency had identified 200 new job categories that might generate 3 million jobs over ten years.

But research and development requires money, which is precisely the area in which the Community is having problems. As Gerd Muhr, new chairman of the economic and social committee, pointed out, one US company spends on research in two months what the Community spends in a year on research, information, innovation and industrial policy put together. Only 0.5 per cent of the total Community budget was set aside for these areas in 1984. Funds for research in 1985 risk further curtailment.

Anna Lubinska