

# Politicians support maritime agency plans

[PARIS] More than a hundred European politicians last week gave tentative support to a proposal from France and Portugal to create a European Maritime Agency, responsible for coordinating a cross-sector approach to research and exploitation of maritime resources.

A meeting organized in Paris by the parliamentary assembly of the Council of Europe broadly agreed that the economic and scientific importance of maritime issues justifies greater political attention and a more forward-looking approach by Europe as a whole. But there seemed little agreement on the precise goals of the proposed agency, and widespread concern that it should not create unnecessary bureaucracy.

The economic and political stakes are high, given that maritime activities include oil exploration, fisheries, shipping, coastal management, pollution control and climate change. "We underestimate the maritime component of Europe," said Paul Roncière, secretary general of the General Secretariat on the Sea, a committee attached to the office of the French prime minister, Lionel Jospin. "Europe needs a distinct maritime policy."

The idea of a European Maritime Agency has been around for some time (see *Nature* 373, 553; 1995). But it has gained new impetus from vigorous support by José Mariano Gago, Portugal's minister of science and technology. Gago told the meeting that its creation would be a "major political step", arguing that "there is no European policy or body charged with coordinating or exploiting [maritime research]".

Claude Allègre, France's science minister, supported the proposals, arguing that in terms of basic science the oceans were still poorly understood. The UK science minister John Battle agreed that the challenges of ocean technology are "as demanding as those of space", but did not express a formal position on the idea of a new agency. But the United Kingdom is said to be open to the idea, if a realistic role can be demonstrated.

Sources say Battle and Allègre last week invited Gago to write to other European ministers with a detailed proposal on the agency's goals and structure. Britain also pressed for this to be accompanied by analysis before the summer by a group of experts from several European countries. Feedback from the meeting indicates Spain, Italy, Iceland and Norway may support the idea.

Draft proposals suggest that the agency's mandate would be decided by regular ministerial conferences, as with the European Space Agency (ESA). But the parallels with ESA end there; there seems broad agreement that maritime issues are too heterogeneous to lend themselves to management by a centralized operational agency, and that any new

body should be a lightweight structure for coordinating scientific, industrial and political activity.

A draft report to the Council of Europe's committee on science and technology by Pedro Roseta, a Spanish MP and the committee's rapporteur, proposes that the agency should study major maritime challenges, "conceive and if necessary manage research programmes"; plan the construction of large European research facilities and present a single European voice in international research projects.

But many feel that maritime research is itself relatively well coordinated. Many bodies already exist, such as the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, and the International Council for the Exploration of the Seas. At the same time, many speakers, and politicians in particular, saw a need for a forum to give policy-makers and industrialists a means of obtaining scientific assessments of key areas in decision-making, such as coastal management and decommissioning of oil rigs.

The coordination of marine research within Europe has been markedly improved, say many observers, by the creation in 1995 of the European Marine and Polar Science Boards (EMAPS), a non-governmental organization set up under the auspices of the European Science Foundation — which represents most marine science organizations (see *Nature* 377, 469; 1995).

The embryo of a European maritime research programme was also created with the launch of the European Union's ECU250 million (US\$271 million) Marine Science and Technology Programme in 1989. Marine sciences were also a priority in the original proposal for the EU's next five-year Framework research programme, but have now been split up within other themes, creating a need for cross-sector coordination.

Given such structures, many are sceptical of the need for a new agency. John Krebs, chief executive of Britain's Natural Environment Research

Council (NERC), says: "From NERC's view there is not a great deal of need for another European body [in terms of research]."

But Pierre Papon, former head of IFREMER, the French marine technology research agency, argues that research capacities in Europe are too "dispersed" and "thinking is too national". He believes improvements could come from pooling resources and more strategic thinking, and cites the lack of strong research in marine biotechnology. Krebs agrees that "Europe has not made a big push" in this area, compared with the United States and Japan.

EMAPS is expected to release a report soon calling for a European initiative in marine biodiversity research. Such grassroots calls need a political outlet, says Laurent d'Ozouville, scientific secretary of EMAPS.

Allègre pointed out that, whereas France, Britain and Germany have agreed to cooperate in the use of the 40 or so existing research vessels (see *Nature* 379, 576; 1996), there is a need to think about cooperating to build new vessels. The only examples so far are the Franco-Spanish *Thalassa*, and a smaller Franco-Italian ship, *L'Europe*.

Krebs agrees the national approach to research ships is bound to give way to thinking about a "European fleet of research vessels". But he says that might be possible simply through multilateral agreements.

Another potential role for the agency that emerged at the meeting was to give Europe a single voice in international research programmes. In broad terms, the advantage of an agency might be to provide a "single point of contact" for a cross-sector approach to maritime issues, says d'Ozouville.

Coastal management, for example, involves research bodies, terrestrial and marine industries, and political action at regional, national and European levels, but "establishing that dialogue has been extremely difficult". "It needs European coordination and a multidisciplinary approach to provide scientific tools for the users managing these zones," says d'Ozouville. **Declan Butler**



Floating an idea: joint research ships such as the Franco-Spanish *Thalassa* may be a way forward.