

Franco-US nuclear services agreement

Paris

FACED with a world-wide slump in the market for nuclear technologies, three leading French companies, Framatome, Cogéma and Uranium Péciney, have teamed up with Babcock and Wilson, the second largest manufacturer of reactors in North America. To be called B & W Fuels Inc., the new company will be the first Franco-American company in the nuclear sector. It will sell nuclear fuels made at Lynchburg in Virginia and offer expertise in reactor-core maintenance to US electricity utilities, competing with Westinghouse, which services about 70 per cent of the US market.

Babcock and Wilson, which built the ill-fated reactor at Three Mile Island, hope that the unblemished safety record of the French companies will boost its credibility. At the same time, the link-up reflects a general restructuring of the nuclear industry, with increasing international collaboration. Framatome, Cogéma and Uranium Péciney already collaborate in France, and together offer experience of the whole nuclear fuels cycle.

France, the second largest nuclear nation, has been looking for an opportunity to penetrate the coveted US market but has always come up against tight protectionist barriers. As Babcock and Wilson will be majority shareholders of the new company, with 51 per cent of the stock, these obstacles should disappear. Because of a world slowing in demand for new reactors, the French hope to sell their expertise in the 'service' industries of core maintenance, uranium extraction, enrichment and reprocessing.

The United States abandoned reprocessing irradiated waste in 1976, in favour of storage, both as a result of a drop in uranium prices and for fear of creating a proliferation of plutonium. Reprocessing is worthwhile only for nations having a nuclear energy output exceeding 25,000 MW. Of these nations, France is possibly the world leader in reprocessing technology, the others being West Germany, Britain and Japan.

Cogéma, a subsidiary of the French atomic energy commission (CEA), processes about 80 per cent of irradiated fuels from all light-water reactors and is shortly to open a new plant in La Hague, bringing its capacity to 1,600 tonnes per year by 1992. The potential demand from clients is considerable. Unless the United States starts reprocessing again (which it pioneered), it could be faced with an estimated 40,000 tonnes of irradiated waste by the year 2000.

Peter Coles

UK rush on superconductivity centre widely criticized

London

HURRIED moves by the Science and Engineering Research Council (SERC) to set up Britain's first University Research Centre in high-temperature superconductivity (see *Nature* 328, 370; 1987), have provoked widespread unease within the academic community. Serious doubts are being expressed about the wisdom of choosing such a fast-moving, unpredictable field of research for the first centre, and many observers are convinced that SERC's haste is a direct result of pressure from central government in a misguided effort to counter international competition.

In July, 11 institutions were invited to submit bids to host the centre, which will concentrate primarily on small devices. There has been almost universal condemnation of the lack of time for the institutions to formulate their proposals — with a deadline of 15 September, and during a period when many academics are either on vacation or attending overseas conferences. SERC hopes to announce the location of the centre before the end of the year, and to see it running by next summer.

The most commonly expressed fear is that the time and effort needed to establish the centre will mean less time spent in the laboratory. Furthermore, the declared aim of giving industry a hand in the funding and management of the centre (the

first of several, in various subjects, to be established — see *Nature* 328, 464; 1987) could, according to some, detract from the more basic research.

Of the institutions invited to bid for this first centre, Imperial College London and the Universities of Bristol and Leeds will not submit a proposal. The Universities of Birmingham and Warwick, which already collaborate in this field, are thought to be preparing a joint application. The Universities of Southampton, Cambridge, Oxford and Strathclyde will submit individual proposals. The University of Liverpool is to put forward a proposal for a 'north-west consortium' involving Liverpool Polytechnic, the Universities of Keele and Lancaster, SERC's Daresbury Laboratory and several industrial partners, including ICI's advanced materials laboratory in nearby Runcorn. Strathclyde University will be seeking to emphasize its strong industrial links. The University of Durham is looking to team up with the University of Newcastle on Tyne and, possibly, Newcastle Polytechnic, as well as various industrial organizations.

The sizes of the bids will vary considerably, depending mainly on whether the institutions are asking for new buildings. One bid is thought to be asking for around £7 million in capital, another around £4 million.

Simon Hadlington

Calm waters for Hughes Medical Institute

Washington

MANY troubled months for the world's largest scientific charity have come to an end with the election of a new president for the Howard Hughes Medical Institute.

Last week, the institute announced that Purnell W. Choppin, vice-president since 1985, is taking over as president. He fills the post left vacant in June when Donald Fredrickson, former director of the National Institutes of Health, resigned after a bitter dispute with the institute's trustees. The institute has not made the details public



Purnell Choppin takes over.

but it appears that both Fredrickson's policies and the involvement of his wife in the institute had caused controversy.

Choppin, formerly a professor of virology at the Rockefeller University, has no wish to speak of the past as the institute enters a phase of rapid growth. Next year, the number of faculty-level investigators will go up from 163 to 186, and researchers and support staff from 1,170 to 1,600 at the institute's 27 laboratories.

The institute has so far operated by building well-financed units, much envied by the ordinary researcher, within leading laboratories. That policy will change next year with an increasing emphasis on appointment of individuals outside the large units. "Resources will be spread to a much larger number of institutions and to support good scientists where we find them", says Choppin. The institute's settlement with the Internal Revenue Service, which enabled it to maintain its status as a medical research organization (see *Nature* 326, 236; 1987), permits moves into new project areas, provided sufficient funds are spent directly on medical research.

Alun Anderson