

'Civil war' scuttles EC research programme

- New Framework programme delayed
- Commission defies member states

London

THE European Communities' (EC) research programme has fallen victim to a power struggle over who controls EC research funding. The EC's civil service, the European Commission, announced last week that it has decided to withdraw five planned research programmes — a move that will block any spending on the EC's third four-year Framework research budget until at least late 1992. Spending on the third Framework was to have started this year.

The decision to withdraw the research programmes is the latest round in a fight between ministers from the EC member states and the Commission. But it is the most serious, as the Commission's latest move has the backing of the European Parliament. The row will delay programmes in marine science and technology, the environment, life sciences and technologies for developing countries, and two programmes in telecommunications — which are the only five among the 15 proposals that make up the third Framework to have made any significant progress down the tortuous path towards final approval.

The decision to withdraw the programmes, which was announced by the Commission's president Jacques Delors, had not yet been presented in writing as *Nature* went to press, but with feelings on both sides running high, a compromise to prevent the programmes' withdrawal seemed unlikely.

The Commission's complaint is that the member states' research ministers have altered the five programmes from the Commission's original proposals, and have refused to include amendments suggested by the Parliament. But the move is seen by many as part of a wider plan by the Commission and the Parliament to increase their own power within the EC. The strongest influence over EC decisions now lies with the ministers of member states, but the Commission and the Parliament both see an opportunity to increase their powers in the coming months.

The Commission's defiance comes as revisions to the EC's constitution are being considered, with member states debating plans for greater EC political and economic unity. Antonio La Pergola, chairman of the Parliament's Energy, Research and Technology Committee, last week welcomed the decision, claiming it as "a step towards restoring the balance" between the member states, the Commission and the Parliament in EC decision-making.

The Commission is now expected to

rewrite the five proposals, before submitting them again to the member states' research ministers. This will delay the spending of more than 1,000 million ECU (about £700 million) in research grants. For some European scientists, particularly those involved with research aimed to benefit developing countries (where the second Framework budget is exhausted), the delay means that no EC money will be available for more than a year.

The disagreements over the five programmes cited by the Commission centre around their management, rather than their scientific content. For example, the research ministers removed a provision that would have allowed the Commission to distribute 10 per cent of each programme's budget to scientists whose research grant applications do not fit precisely within the terms of the formal request for applications. Another contentious issue is the research ministers' decision that the environment research programme should be overseen by a powerful management committee able to refer decisions taken by the Commission back to the research ministers for approval. The Parliament and the Commission say that the committee should have an advisory role only.

Representatives of the member states in Brussels are shocked by the Commission's unprecedented move, and question its legality. The Commission is allowed to withdraw research programmes, but only if the proposals have been changed substantially ('denatured', in Euro-jargon) by the member states' ministers. The ministers' legal advisers believe this is not the case for the five programmes in question, and the ministers may take the Commission to the European Court of Justice. But although that may prove a legal point, it is unlikely to accelerate spending of the third Framework budget.

Glyn Ford, a British Labour Member of the European Parliament who sits on La Pergola's Energy, Research and Technology Committee, says he has "some sympathy" with individual scientists who will be denied research grants over the coming year, but maintains that the Commission's move "is in the longer-term interest of EC research and development". Ford believes that the European Parliament, as an elected body, should have a stronger role in formulating the EC's research programme, and accuses the member states' ministers of "riding roughshod" over the wishes of the Parliament and the Commission.

Peter Aldhous

UK NUCLEAR PHYSICS

Daresbury hopes dashed

London

THE UK Science and Engineering Research Council (SERC) has announced that the tandem accelerator at its Daresbury laboratory will close at the end of 1992, ending nuclear physicists' hopes of obtaining extra funds to continue running the machine. The closure of the Daresbury Nuclear Structure Facility (NSF) will leave British nuclear structure researchers dependent on access to accelerators on the European mainland.

In the package of cuts unveiled by SERC last month, the NSF's survival beyond 1992 was made contingent on a successful bid for extra money for Daresbury from the 1992-93 science budget (see *Nature* 349, 551; 14 February 1991). But that rescue attempt has fallen at the first hurdle. SERC's announcement came only days after a weekend meeting of the Advisory Board for the Research Councils (ABRC), convened to discuss the research councils' bids for new money for 1992-93. SERC staff last week declined to comment on that confidential meeting, but it seems that the ABRC vetoed the bid for money to save the NSF.

Sir Mark Richmond, chairman of SERC, last week said the decision marks "a sad day for the SERC". SERC will try to minimize redundancies, but natural wastage and transfers to other laboratories seem unlikely to save all of the 150 NSF staff.

Until the number of forced redundancies is known, the cost to SERC of closing the NSF after 1992 cannot be calculated, but it is likely to amount to several million pounds if the building is to be demolished.

The announcement has demoralized British nuclear structure researchers, who had been led to believe that SERC would carry out a full scientific review of British nuclear structure physics before making a decision on the NSF. SERC staff say that a review of British nuclear structure physics will still take place, but this will now concentrate on research grant spending, currently running at about £3 million a year. Without their centrepiece facility, nuclear structure physicists fear that grant spending will soon be eroded.

Peter Twin, from the University of Liverpool, and chairman of SERC's Nuclear Structure Committee, describes the promise of a review as "hollow".

The priority now is to obtain time for British physicists on accelerators elsewhere in Europe. Twin warns that the initiative must be taken by SERC, not just the scientific community, if European science funding agencies are to be convinced to open their facilities to British researchers. The perception now is that SERC has "no policy" for nuclear structure research, Twin says.

Peter Aldhous