Court young French postdocs, says petition...

...as changes at the top suggest action ahead

Declan Butler, Paris

High on the agenda for Gérard Mégie (see right) and Geneviève Berger, the two new leaders at France's Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS), is the need to respond to many French scientists' worries about the future of the country's research base.

Last week, members of the Conseil Supérieur de la Recherche et de la Technologie, the research ministry's main advisory body, relaunched a public petition calling for a long-term scientific employment policy.

The move follows a recent warning by the Academy of Sciences that many research areas — particularly genomics, nuclear science and pharmacology — face a crisis if more is not done to attract new students and to retain postdocs. The age profile of researchers in France means that some 50% will need replacing over the next ten years.

Henri-Edouard Audier, head of a chemistry laboratory at the Ecole Polytechnique near Paris and trade union representative on the Conseil Supérieur, says that, although the 2001 research budget is "the best in ten years", more must be done to secure a long-term commitment to young researchers. This is needed, he says, to attract more young people to a career in research and stem the postdoc brain drain.

The 2001 budget (see *Nature* **407,** 435–436; 2000) provides for 265 new research posts, and research minister Roger-Gérard Schwartzenberg has said that he is committed to a long-term employment policy for science. But many of the posts falling empty are teaching posts in universities, which come under the ministry of education, rather than the research ministry.

The petition's signatories, who include nearly 1,400 eminent French scientists, want reassurance that any employment policy will be a collaboration between the two ministries. Audier says he hopes that Mégie, who signed the petition in his previous job as a university professor, will remain "consistent" in his CNRS role.

But Olivier Laprévote, a biochemist who runs a laboratory on the CNRS campus at Gif-sur-Yvette, believes that government action comes too late. He says there are already laboratories without directors, and too few young researchers with the experience to replace them within the next few years.

The problem goes beyond the lack of an employment policy. Laprévote asks: "Even if we can promise long-term career opportunities to doctoral students, who will want to take them up?

"Newly qualified researchers, even with two or three years of postdoc experience, are forced to go through a complicated and, at times, random recruitment process before clinching a post that will offer them a starting salary of at best between 10,000 and 11,000 francs (US$1,300–1,450) per month, a fraction of what they can earn in the private sector. It is difficult to find an argument to persuade young researchers to stay in the public sector." ■

The French government announced last week the appointment of climatologist Gérard Mégie as president of the country's main research agency, the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS).

Research minister Roger-Gérard Schwartzenberg says that the choice of Mégie, currently director of the Institut Pierre-Simon Laplace des Sciences de l'Environnement Global, based in Paris and Versailles, reflects the government's desire "to bring science and environment closer together".

It also reflects a drive to develop multidisciplinarity at the CNRS. Mégie, a physicist turned environmental scientist who specializes in atmospheric research, joins Geneviève Berger, a physicist turned biologist, who was named CNRS director-general in August (see *Nature* **407,** 435–436; 2000).

Schwartzenberg says the pair will give "a new boost of life to a CNRS that is keeping up with the times". They will implement reforms to the organization approved two weeks ago by the Conseil d'Etat, France's top legislative body, after a lengthy national debate (see *Nature* **404,** 426; 2000).

AFP

Mégie: 'will implement recently approved reforms'.

These reforms give the agency greater independence from the research ministry and a clearer division of responsibilities at the top. The president of the agency, together with its administrative council, will focus on overall policy and manage the CNRS's relationship with external partners, including universities and international organizations.

In contrast, the director-general will be responsible mainly for the scientific, administrative and financial management of the agency, and will have the authority to create new scientific departments and institutes without waiting for the research ministry's approval.

A new external evaluation committee will be formed, made up of French and foreign scientists and industry representatives, to evaluate the activities of the CNRS at least every four years. The main scientific and departmental advisory councils will be broadened to include more foreign members, and a new ethics committee will be created. **D.B.**

Japan's GM corn will undergo tests

David Cyranoski, Tokyo

Reports that an unapproved form of genetically modified corn (maize) has found its way into the Japanese food supply have prompted government action in both Japan and the United States.

StarLink corn, produced in the United States by the French company Aventis CropScience, contains the pesticide Cry9C, which some have warned could cause allergic reactions if consumed. As a result, it has been approved for use only in animal feed in the United States, and the discovery of Cry9C in taco shells on sale in US supermarkets led to a massive product recall earlier this year (see *Nature* 407, 438; 2000).

In Japan, StarLink has not yet been approved for consumption by either humans or animals. But the Consumers Union of Japan reported late last month that StarLink protein had been detected in corn meal, and there have been reports of it showing up in six other products.

The US Department of Agriculture has now announced that it will test corn that is being shipped to Japan for the presence of StarLink, and Japan's equivalent ministry will start doing its own tests on the product's safety. These tests include feeding the corn to chickens and testing for any debilitating effects on the chickens themselves, and for the presence of the Cry9C protein in the chicken meat. ■