

# Europe boosts genome resource centres...

Alison Abbott, Munich

Brussels bureaucrats can be flexible when it matters. The European Union's (EU) research commission last week announced changes to the Quality of Life component of its fifth Framework programme of research — which is usually thought to be set in stone. The changes mean increased support for genomics resource centres and large-scale genomics research.

The move is a response to complaints from scientists that EU research money is spread too thinly and that the work involved in applying is disproportionate to the low success rate and limited financial returns. They also claim that it fails to support resource centres which they believe are vital to post-genomics research in Europe. Such facilities include the European Bioinformatics Institute (EBI) near Cambridge and the European Mouse Mutant Archive in Rome.

Many EU member states, fearful of long-term commitments, want the Framework programme to fund only research at such facilities, and not their core activities. This recently threw the centres into financial crisis (see *Nature* 405, 723; 2000).

But the commission has now earmarked an extra 25 million euros (US\$21 million) for “genomic and proteomic databases and repositories of suitable animal models”. The money is being raised by an internal 1% levy on other parts of the Quality of Life programme.

A rule preventing the support of routine operational costs still holds, as the commission cannot change the legal basis of the Framework programme. But it will be more open-minded in its definition of what can be funded. For example, centres have been informally assured that the expansion of databases and repositories will be eligible.

“There is no question that the extra money is good news,” says Graham Cameron, joint head of the EBI. But some researchers are nervous that eligibility depends on how reviewers interpret the rule.

The commission has also shuffled Quality of Life funds to create a pot of 30 million euros for “integrated projects”, large initiatives incorporating research, networks and training. A call for ideas in functional genomics for human health has been issued, and the commission will make a preselection before summer.

There will then be a second call for proposals in five chosen research areas, and three integrated projects will be funded. Contracts are unlikely to be signed before February 2002.

The impetus behind these changes comes from two directions. First, the commission wants to show its willingness to support



functional genomics on a large scale, using ideas generated by the research community. Second, it hopes to test out a mechanism it would like to see operate in the sixth Frame-

work programme. This will most probably abandon the funding of individual projects, and will focus instead on large-scale programmes similar to the integrated projects (*Nature* 407, 433; 2000).

The response from the scientific community has been generally positive. “It sounds wonderful,” says Hans Lehrach, a director of the Max Planck Institute for Molecular Genetics in Berlin and a spokesman for the German Human Genome Project. “But it seems a slow procedure — in the meantime a post-genomic Celera-2 could have come in and swept away all the rewards.”

“Big projects are important,” says Joel Bockaert, head of the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique’s Laboratory of Cellular and Molecular Physiology in Montpellier. But, he says, each integrated project would need a research manager, and these are in short supply across Europe. ■

## ...as German genomics gets cash windfall

A windfall of money raised by government sales of mobile-phone licences is set to provide a boost for post-genomics research in Germany.

DM350 million (US\$150 million) will be spent over the next three years in building up a ‘technology platform’ comprising different high-throughput post-genomics technologies, and creating networks of university clinical researchers to use it.

The technology platform will be installed primarily in non-university research centres where genomics infrastructures have already been built up. These include the GSF national research centre in Munich, the Max Delbrück Centre for Molecular Medicine and the Max Planck Institute for Molecular Genetics in Berlin, the Centre for Biotechnological Research in Braunschweig and the German Cancer Centre in Heidelberg.

Decisions about what post-genomics facilities will be provided, and whether some of them should be extended into universities, will be made in consultation with the scientific community over the coming weeks. Possible components include a single-nucleotide polymorphism (SNP) facility, to analyse the small genetic



Research secretary Catenhusen targets technology access.

variations between individuals which may correlate with disease, and a battery of new mouse-phenotyping laboratories, which will ‘diagnose’, or otherwise characterize, mutant mice.

The profiles of the clinical networks — in categories such as cardiovascular disease, neuropathology or cancer, for example — will also be decided upon within the next couple of months, through consultation with the clinical community, probably followed by a competition.

“Germany will be the first country to take a systematic approach to post-genomics,” pledges Wolf-Michael Catenhusen, secretary for research in the federal government. He says that

the approach will give universities, which train the next generation of scientists, access to the newest genomics technologies for their clinical research. Spending could start as early as six months from now.

“This is a great way of bringing clinical researchers on board, with a much wider range of technologies at their disposal,” says Martin Hrabé de Angelis, who runs the mouse mutant facility at the GSF. “If someone comes up with an interesting candidate gene for a disease, we can funnel it into the platform and generate a huge amount of information.”

Some clinical researchers are unhappy, though, that more of the money is not going to the universities themselves. Clemens Sorg, dean of medicine at the University of Münster and spokesman for the interdisciplinary research groups in clinical medicine, feels that the planned university networks “are to be the servants of the big platform”.

But Detlev Ganten, director of the Max Delbrück Centre, denies this will be the case, and says that scientific credit will ultimately go to clinicians. “We will all work to the same end, and the interesting results will come from the clinical networks,” he says. **A. A.**