

Rome 'could host European mouse laboratory'

Munich. The council of the European Molecular Biology Laboratory (EMBL), based in Heidelberg, Germany, was to be briefed this week on a proposal to construct a mouse genetics laboratory in Rome that could, its supporters hope, persuade Italy not to leave EMBL at the end of the year.

Italy announced its intention to quit last year, saying that it is dissatisfied with the returns on its membership subscription. Italy pays 16 per cent of the laboratory's annual budget — currently DM10 million (US\$6.3 million) — but there are very few Italian staff scientists in Heidelberg (see *Nature* 366, 604; 1993).

The project under consideration is an initiative backed by the European Commission (EC) in Brussels to set up a laboratory to act as a European-level repository for mouse mutants. As such, it would be complementary to the Jackson Laboratory at Bar Harbor, Maine, in the United States.

The idea for a similar European facility was proposed last year by Peter Gruss, a German cell biologist who is one of 25 personal scientific advisers to Antonio Ruberti, the commissioner for research. Gruss says that Europe urgently needs a facility to maintain stocks of the ever-increasing number of mutant strains, now being created at a rate of around 3,000 a year.

His idea has been enthusiastically supported by Ruberti and his advisory board, who have described it as "vital for studies of the diseases (such as cancer and coronary heart disease) that are the main causes of illness and death in the [EU]" (see *Nature* 369, 11; 1994).

Gruss argues that such a service laboratory would need to be combined with high-level research in order to maintain scientific standards. This is where EMBL comes in. Gruss proposes that EMBL should run the facility, combined with an active research team, as an outstation of its laboratory in Heidelberg.

At present, the idea is only a recommendation as far as the EU and EMBL are concerned. Before it can proceed, the EU's next biotechnology programme (within Framework IV), which includes funding for genetic repositories in Europe, must be approved. Only then can a call for proposals be made.

Italy is already working on its own proposal. Umberto Colombo, the former research minister, has written to his successor, Stefano Podestà, suggesting that urgent consideration be given to offering research laboratories at Monterotondo near Rome to EMBL as part of a bid to host the facility.

The laboratories which will provide the 20,000 square metres required for the proposed facility were built by ENICHEM, the loss-making chemical subsidiary of the state-owned Eni energy and chemicals group, but never put into service because of

ENICHEM's financial problems.

Italian scientists have asked Podestà for a meeting to discuss the proposal, and are awaiting a reply. Meanwhile EMBL must decide whether the proposed facility would fit in with its own long-term plans. The laboratory has declined to comment on the proposal, but has already sent a delegation to examine the site.

But EMBL's member states are likely to be positive, particularly because the proposal could bring Italy back to EMBL membership. Colombo predicts that Italy would

definitely rejoin if the mouse facility, backed by EC funding, is agreed, although the final decision on membership would be made by Podestà.

But Gruss, who is also one of Germany's delegates to EMBL, says that he would insist to the council that Italy agrees to rejoin before the idea is discussed further. The clock is ticking — EMBL must settle its 1995 budget by the end of the year and would very much like Italy to commit itself to coming back into the fold before then.

Alison Abbott

Future brightens up for California

San Francisco. With growing signs that retail spending and the construction industry are pulling California out of its three-year recession, the state's science-based industries offer a solid platform for long-term growth, according to a report just published by a group of economists.

But the economists also say that such growth will only take place if the state continues to invest in education and infrastructure, and could be jeopardized if insufficient funds are provided for state-run universities. Over the past three years, the state has cut the University of California's budget by 16 per cent.

According to the Center for Continuing Study of the California Economy in Palo Alto, foreign trade, high technology, professional services, and tourism and entertainment promise to provide the state with a healthy economic base and above-average growth prospects.

Even during the recession, the report points out, California continued to produce a record number of high-technology start-up companies. In 1993, for example, venture capitalists invested \$950 million in new Silicon Valley companies. Initial public offerings also hit a record, and profits at the 100 largest companies in Silicon Valley grew by 36 per cent.

Steven Levy, director of the centre and the report's principal author, says four factors prolonged the recession in California: a sharp decline in residential building, cuts in defence spending, weakness in commercial aircraft orders and a large relative decline in consumer spending.

But the construction industry predicts a good year ahead, and retailers have reported four consecutive strong months. Although 161,000 jobs were lost in the aircraft, space and defence-related industries in the past four years, says Levy, many of the aerospace job losses resulted from civilian market adjustments, and those jobs will return as aircraft exports rebound under strong demand.

The report predicts a reduction in the rate at which new jobs are created in the 1990s. But it says that the state will still continue to expand faster than the nation as a whole. Almost all of the California job growth would take place in non-manufacturing activities, many of which offer high wages, the report said.

But these opportunities will not be fulfilled unless the state develops a strat-



egy to fund critical public investments, warned Robert Arnold, co-founder of the economic think-tank.

The state now invests 14 per cent less than the national average in educating each public school pupil, according to the Center of Budget and Policy Priorities in Washington. California's spending on roads, bridges and other public works is also below the national average.

Arnold says that the state must maintain a skilled labour force, world-class physical infrastructure, a high quality of life and a competitive regulatory environment to attract private investment in key sectors. An excellent university system and highly regarded laboratories are critical to attracting and maintaining growth industries, he said.

Sally Lehrman