European research heads move to sharpen their talons

Munich. The heads of Europe's main national research funding organizations, who have been meeting informally for nearly two years to discuss how their organizations can work more closely with the European Commission's (EC) research programmes, have decided to set themselves up as a formal body to give themselves a stronger voice within the European Union (EU).

Meeting in Madrid last week, the group, known as the Eurohorcs (for European heads of research councils) decided to elect a president when it meets next spring. In the meantime, José Mato of Spain's CSIC is temporarily holding the reins of a newly formed steering committee.

The impetus for the formal establishment of the group was its members' disappointment that the EC research commissioner, Antonio Ruberti, excluded a Eurohorcs representative when he set up his 100-strong advisory European Science and Technology Assembly (ESTA) last September (although many of those appointed to ESTA also happen to be Eurohorcs).

Such a representative would have had a much more powerful voice in ESTA because he or she could have spoken for all EU research organizations, says Jan Borgman, head of the Dutch NWO, who is also chairman of the assembly.

Borgman says that national research councils have a strong interest in EU research programmes, which have much larger budgets now than in the recent past.

The Eurohorcs want a greater influence on EU research policy and to be more closely involved in coordinating both national and European-wide research programmes. They also want more direct links with the EC in Brussels.

Such plans could conflict with the goals of the European Science Foundation (ESF), based in Strasbourg, which had also been hoping to develop a similar advisory role in Brussels (see *Nature* **366,** 193; 1993).

Many smaller EU countries would have liked the Eurohorcs and the ESF to have joined forces, combining the resources of the ESF's secretariat and scientific staff with the politically powerful Eurohorcs in order to achieve shared aims. But some larger countries preferred a more direct role in Brussels, and did not want their influence diluted through ESF.

Both sides insist that there is no conflict of aims, and representatives from each will attend the other's meetings. Meanwhile the ESF is continuing to carry out a strategic reappraisal of its activities and a search for a new identity. Both will be top of the agenda when its general assembly meets in Strasbourg this week. **Alison Abbott**

NIH seeks bids for vector centres for gene therapy

Washington. The US National Institutes of Health (NIH), concerned that clinical trials of gene therapy are being held back because of the difficulty faced by researchers in obtaining suitable vectors, have announced that they will award $3.5 million next year to establish a small number of National Vector Laboratories.

In requesting applications to run these centres, the NIH says that the failure to accommodate researchers' needs for vector production "constitutes a barrier to progress in the field of gene therapy".

Several factors have given rise to the present situation. First, producing new vectors is expensive, as those to be used in humans must be manufactured in facilities that meet stringent requirements laid down by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

Second, many of the small companies that might have produced vectors on a contracts basis have recently gone out of business. Finally, biotechnology companies still in a position to do so face a shortage of capital, and are under pressure from investors to produce immediate results.

Gary Nabel, an investigator for the Howard Hughes Medical Institute at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, describes the NIH initiative as "less than would be ideal, but we have to start somewhere". Nabel's group is one of the few that make their own vectors and may bid to become a national centre.

Researchers at Michigan are already discussing possible collaborations with some of the other groups in the United States producing vectors about ways of making them available to investigators.

Malcolm Brenner, who is developing gene therapies at St Jude's Hospital in Memphis, Tennessee, describes vectors as "the key to gene therapy". Vectors include various types of virus whose genetic material is manipulated so that they cannot reproduce some types of lipid compounds. The vector targets specific cells to incorporate new genetic material into the genome. Nearly all aspects of their mechanism need to be improved. "Vector development is primitive," says Brenner. "We only have the model-T Ford."

According to Brenner, the NIH's decision to fund between one and three National Vector Laboratories means that collaboration between academic institutions and industry may be simplified. At present, investigators often need to negotiate with three or four companies for materials when establishing gene-therapy protocols. Each company is concerned that it may gain nothing from the collaboration while enhancing its competitors' products, and negotiations can therefore be protracted and complex.

The aim of such national laboratories will be to produce clinical-grade vectors for human gene therapy. The NIH expects that a few grants will be awarded before next August and that funding will continue for five years.

The resulting vectors will already have had preclinical testing, and will be made available to investigators with protocols approved both by the FDA and, if necessary, the NIH's Recombinant DNA Advisory Committee. **Helen Gavaghan**

New element spurs naming protest

London. **A controversy over the naming of new elements has been aggravated by the announcement last week that researchers at the Gesellschaft für Schwerionenforschung (GSI) in Darmstadt, Germany, have successfully created element 110 — but are refusing to propose a name for it.**

Many physical chemists have been upset about the announcement by the International Union of Pure and Applied Chemistry (IUPAC) in September that it plans to name element 106 rutherfordium, after the New Zealand physicist Ernest Rutherford, rather than seaborgium. Seaborgium was proposed by the discoverers of element 106 at the Lawrence Berkeley Laboratory (LBL) in California in honour of the Nobel prizewinner Glenn T. Seaborg (see *Nature* 371, 639; 1994).

Although the paper describing the new element is not expected to be published until the end of December (in the journal *Zeitschrift für Physik*), the GSI group, led by Sigurd Hofman, were sufficiently confident of their 'discovery' to announce it last week. The laboratory had earlier created elements 107, 108 and 109, and, according to Peter Armbruster, head of nuclear chemistry at GSI, the group is more confident of its latest discovery than when it announced '109' in 1984.

But the discoverers are still unhappy with the names proposed for the earlier elements by the IUPAC Commission on Nomenclature of Inorganic Chemistry. GSI had suggested nielsbohrium (107), after physicist Niels Bohr, hassium (108) after Hassia, the latin name for the region in which GSI is located and meitnerium (109) after the physicist Lise Meitner. But the names proposed by the IUPAC▶