CERN photo

Llewellyn Smith: CERN's director general led European delegation in Washington talks.

US role in LHC 'to be agreed within a year'

Washington. A mechanism for US participation in the construction of the proposed Large Hadron Collider (LHC) at CERN, the European Laboratory for Particle Physics in Geneva, Switzerland, will be agreed by the end of the year, according to negotiators at an initial meeting in Washington last week.

Officials from CERN led by its director general, Christopher Llewellyn Smith, and from the US Department of Energy and the US National Science Foundation agreed on the composition of a 'negotiating team' to oversee the detailed discussions of three working groups, which will start work almost immediately. They will deal with accelerator construction, scientific detector work, and the administrative and legal framework for an agreement respectively.

A communiqué issued by both sides said that CERN had stressed that it needed agreement on the scope of US involvement in the project's detectors by the end of 1996. CERN also said it needed to know the size of any US contribution to the construction of the accelerator by the end of 1997, when the laboratory's council is due to finalize the LHC's construction schedule.

In practice, the US budget process requires the Clinton administration to decide by the end of 1996 how much it would like to contribute, enabling Congress to consider the suggestion and, if it agrees, make the money available in the 1998 financial year, which begins in October 1997.

A US team will visit CERN in a few months' time to gather cost and schedule information on the project, and the full negotiating team will meet again in July to ensure the progress of the three working groups. The communiqué anticipates "that agreement will be reached within a year".

American support for the detector work is reasonably well-assured, but US involvement in construction will face opposition in Congress. The Department of Energy should, however, have some money available from 1998, when its domestic construction commitments start to decrease, and the construction work may win approval in Congress, provided the money is spent with US contractors. **Colin Macilwain**

European debate on biotech highlights policy differences

Brussels. The European Commission's new-found wish to be seen as a 'transparent' organization willing to mount open debates was manifested by a conference on biotechnology that it organized in Brussels last week. The meeting brought together in public for the first time representatives from Europe's three decision-making institutions — the commission, the European Parliament and the Council of Ministers — for an "exchange of views" in what is known in Euro-jargon as a trialogue.

The decision to hold the conference followed the unexpected rejection by the parliament last March of a draft directive from the commission seeking to clarify European law on the protection of biotechnological inventions, after the directive had already been approved by the council (see *Nature* **364**, 103; 1995).

The directive would have confirmed that human genes and genetically altered animals and plants can be patented, and its rejection was the commission's first experience of the new powers granted to the parliament under the Maastricht Treaty. These introduced a process of 'co-decision' under which all three institutions, rather than just the council, which represents the governments of member states, must approve some European laws.

A revised version of the directive, adopted by the commission last month (see *Nature* **378**, 756; 1995), is due to be formally published this week. The commission, anxious to improve its chances of being accepted by the parliament, organized last week's meeting "to promote an open dialogue on biotechnology between the institutions and more widely with all interested parties". The commission feels that closer collaboration with members of the European Parliament (MEPs), who have more direct contact with interest groups and pressure groups opposed to genetic engineering, could have avoided last March's defeat.

At the meeting, which was not intended to produce any common conclusions, Martin Bangemann, commissioner for industry, admitted that the commission can no longer conduct its business behind closed doors. "With the patent directive, we were unable to convince parliament," he said. "We can only do this if we are transparent."

Three further directives are under discussion in Europe in addition to that on patenting. A controversial draft directive on novel foods, which will have its second reading in parliament within the next few months, would require explicit labelling of foods produced by any new procedure — including biotechnological processes — that changes the chemical composition of the product. The directive would not require labelling of foods produced by genetic engineering if they are chemically identical to those produced by conventional procedures. But many MEPs are calling for compulsory labelling of all genetically engineered foods.

The commission is also seeking to update two directives passed in 1990. Last month, it approved an amendment to the directive on the contained use of genetically modified microorganisms (GMOs), simplifying administrative procedures for those that are designated low-risk. This move is intended to reduce the burden of regulation on Europe's biotechnology industry, as is a parallel review of a companion directive on the release of GMOs into the environment.

The commission used last week's meeting to try to convince parliament that it is not ignoring important ethical issues in putting forward these directives. It introduced its Group of Advisers on the Ethical Implications of Biotechnology, a group of nine independent experts nominated by the commission, set up to advise the commission on ethical issues raised by biotechnology and to inform the general public of these issues.

But the group's work remains little known outside of the commission, and many MEPs argued strongly at the meeting that the commission had not in the past taken sufficient account of the ethical implications of applications of biotechnology, focusing instead on potential economic advantages.

Others expressed concern at the way that many MEPs stressed the potential risks, rather than the benefits, of biotechnology. Ian Taylor, for example, Britain's science minister, said that focusing on problems rather than benefits was wrong. "Biotechnology is important to Europe, and should not be hindered," he said.

In the past, the council of ministers has tended to be more enthusiastic about biotechnology than parliament. But there is also some dissent within the council itself. Denmark's Claus Grube, for example, told the meeting that his country was unhappy with both the proposal on labelling of novel foods and the draft amendment to the directive on the contained use of GMOs.

The diversity of opinions expressed at the meeting highlighted the difficulties that Europe is likely to face in the next few years in creating a revised framework for applications of biotechnological processes. There was a general welcome for the commission's efforts to bring the three-way debate into the open, but MEPs and council representatives alike complained about its poor organization. The agenda for the long-planned meeting was released only a few days before Christmas. **Alison Abbott**