

French labs funded by 'big science' cuts

[PARIS] Claude Allègre, the French minister for national education, research and technology, this week confirmed a large increase in research jobs, launched the country's first scheme of postdoctoral fellowships, and promised to reorganize France's research agencies.

In his first major policy statement on research since taking office in June, Allègre also cut funding for 'big science' facilities, and said he intended to end France's love affair with manned space flight, focusing its space activities on scientific and commercial goals. And he announced plans to set up a personal advisory board, half of whose members will be drawn from other European countries.

The FF53 billion (US\$8.9 billion) civil budget for research and development, which was announced last week (*Nature* 389, 432; 1997), will create 600 posts for scientists in the research organizations, 121 of them available immediately. Combined with 800 new posts in universities, as well as posts left vacant through retirement, there will be about 3,500 employment opportunities for young scientists this year.

The increase in scientific posts has been widely welcomed. After a fall in recruitment in recent years, "it is incontestably an important reversal of the past trend," says Henry-Edouard Audier, a chemist at the Ecole Polytechnique and a member of the board of the National Union of Scientific Researchers (SNCS).

Recruitment is the main preoccupation of the union, which argues that it is urgently needed to maintain a sensible age structure in the country's scientific workforce, with

half scheduled to retire over the next decade.

A new postdoctoral scheme has been allocated FF50 million. This will initially fund 250 posts in industry. But the government intends to extend the scheme to research organizations and universities after discussions with the organizations and trade unions. A special venture capital fund will also help postgraduates to create their own companies.

Allègre also promised on Monday (6 October) to seek an end to research tax credits for large companies — "they will have to invest themselves" — and to concentrate such credits on small and medium-sized companies, which are less able to afford research. Ministry officials say that credits for companies will be linked directly to their targets for recruiting scientists.

The research ministry itself is being reorganized to increase the emphasis on technological innovation. The ministry at present has 16 offices under its department for research and technology. It will now be split into two departments, one for research and the other for technology; Allègre says that the heavy day-to-day demands of research have in the past resulted in a neglect of technology. The number of offices will be reduced to 10, and women will be appointed to head up to half of them — these posts are currently all held by men.

Though many of these promises on employment have been welcomed, the unions are less happy about the funding for laboratories. This will increase this year from 2 to 3 per cent in research organizations, and by 5.4 per cent in universities.



Allègre: creating 3,500 posts for young scientists but cutting funding for space research.

Allègre has already promised to shift the emphasis from large programmes to investigator-driven research. But despite announcing that he will transfer FF300 million to achieve this from the FF4 billion budget for 'big science', the unions remain dissatisfied. "He has stabilized the situation, but there is still an effort to be made," says Audier, who points out that laboratory funds have been particularly hard hit by cuts in recent years.

The FF300 million reduction will mainly fall on microgravity research and other space programmes, although observers say that construction of the Virgo gravitational wave detector and Soleil synchrotron may also be delayed. Allègre this week reaffirmed his opposition to manned space flight, saying that France's priorities will be telecommunications, Earth observation, military satellites and robotic planetary missions. He recently appointed Gérard Brachet as director of CNES, the French space agency, with instructions to implement such reforms.

Allègre also said that France would respect its international commitments. But one ministry official says that France and Germany may negotiate spending ceilings on their contribution to the international space station, and pull out if these are exceeded. Allègre claimed that the United States wanted European countries to continue financing the station "to prevent us having our own independent programmes".

Other developments announced by Allègre include a new body to coordinate life science research among research organizations, and a reform of INSERM, the national biomedical research organization. A broader reform which would see a reduction in the number of research agencies is also on the cards, according to one ministry official, who says that, for example, life sciences research may be transferred out of the Atomic Energy Commission (CEA). **Declan Butler**

German research agencies feel the pinch

[MUNICH] Germany's two main scientific organizations, the Max-Planck-Society (MPS) and the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG), which is Germany's university grants council, are likely to have their anticipated increase in federal funding cut from 5 per cent to about 3.5 per cent next year, as a result of a decision last week by the parliamentary commission on the budget.

Overall, Germany's 1998 federal budget for research and education would be trimmed by DM22 million (US\$12.5 million), to just

under DM15 billion. The parliamentary committee adjusted cabinet proposals for the federal budget for the MPS and the DFG, published last July, to DM785 million (down DM8 million) and DM1,070 million (down DM11 million) respectively.

In the past five years, the budgets of both organizations enjoyed a steady increase of five per cent a year, enabling them to catch up with costs from the reunification of German science. In July, Jürgen Rüttgers, Germany's research minister, promised a similar increase for 1998.

Germany's federal budget will be finally approved by parliament in late November, and the recommendations of the budget committee are usually accepted. But, before that, relatively minor adjustments may be made as a result of high-level negotiations. Hubert Markl and Wolfgang Frühwald, the presidents of the MPS and the DFG, have already reacted sharply to the proposed cuts. At a meeting in Jena last week, they asked Rüttgers for support and reminded him of his five per cent promise. **Quirin Schiermeier**