

# CNRS wants more competition for grants

[PARIS] The French Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS), Europe's largest fundamental research agency, is substantially to increase funding for its 1,300 laboratories. The rise will be paid for by cuts in spending on large science facilities and strategic research programmes.

The measures were announced last week by Catherine Bréchnignac, the recently appointed director general of the agency. Speaking at her first press conference since taking office, she also confirmed the creation this year of 425 posts at the 25,772-strong agency — a marked reversal of the past few years' stagnation in recruitment.

Bréchnignac's proposed reforms are modest compared with recent unsuccessful plans to reform the agency, ranging from dismantling it completely to transferring large numbers of its laboratories to the universities (see *Nature* 371, 639; 1994). The research minister, Claude Allègre, is keen for CNRS to slash its bureaucracy and shift the emphasis towards investigator-driven research.

Under Bréchnignac's plans, CNRS will increase the budget for spending by laboratories on equipment and running costs by 7–8 per cent this year, and will introduce greater competition for these funds. The increase has been warmly welcomed by researchers, who have been accustomed to living on a shoestring. The agency spends more than three-quarters of its budget on salaries, and 10 per cent on 'big science' facilities, which leaves little for everyday laboratory running expenses.

This year's CNRS budget of FF14.7 billion (US\$2.5 billion) includes a 2.2 per cent increase for salaries, but otherwise is up just 1.1 per cent — less than inflation. To pay for the increase in research laboratory spending, the agency intends to cut its FF445-million budget for big science facilities by about 10 per cent, and to reduce its FF160 million spending on strategic programmes by a similar proportion.

As a result, the national Saturn accelerator at Saclay, near Paris, will be closed at the end of the year. Funding for Ganil, a new heavy-ion accelerator, and other large physics facilities will be reduced.

Bréchnignac hopes that the consequences of these reductions may be partly offset by greater foreign participation in national facilities. At the same time, she indicated her support for Virgo, a planned Franco-Italian gravitational wave detector, and Soleil, a proposed FF1 billion synchrotron, which has been frozen for the time being by the science ministry.

Bréchnignac also promises greater competition in the distribution of research funds. At present, funds are distributed on a *pro rata* basis to laboratories, depending on their size

and overall performance. In future, much greater emphasis will be placed on the "originality and creativity" of individual teams and projects.

"We will be much more selective," says Jacques Sevin, CNRS director for strategy and programmes. He says that whereas strategic research goals, such as biotechnology, will not change much, these will increasingly be supported by "unsolicited proposals".

The procedures for evaluating research groups will become more international. Foreign scientists will be asked both to rank French research groups and proposals and to sit on the review panels that evaluate laboratories every four years.

Three-quarters of the money available for laboratories will be distributed directly on this basis. In one innovation, however, 10 per cent will be used to create a special fund to finance promising new projects or researchers. Another 15 per cent will be reserved for interdisciplinary projects in, for example, biotechnology, new materials, environment and telecommunications.

Many scientists have welcomed the promise to encourage greater competition for funding, although there is some scepti-



**Bréchnignac: more funds for running costs and equipment, more competition for project grants.**

cism about how this will work out in practice. "Let's wait and see," says Pierre Chambon, head of the French Institute of Genetics and Molecular Biology, near Strasbourg.

The National Union of Scientific Researchers is giving Bréchnignac the benefit of the doubt. Henri-Edouard Audier, a member of the union's board, says that although the details of Bréchnignac's plans are still too vague to predict the outcome, she is a "pragmatic" person with whom the unions feel "they can do business".

Declan Butler

## Nuclear agency may absorb physics institute

[PARIS] France's Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS) may be about to transfer the entire National Institute for Nuclear and Particle Physics (IN2P3) — which accounts for one-tenth of the CNRS's staff and budget — to the atomic energy commission, CEA.

The move is intended to increase CEA's fundamental research capacity, which is widely considered to lag behind the commission's engineering prowess (see *Nature* 374, 104; 1995). Long-term fundamental research is needed to provide solutions for managing nuclear waste and developing safer and cleaner reactors.

The proposal falls within government plans to clarify the responsibilities of the various research organizations, which have become confused. The CEA, for example, has diversified away from its core mission of supporting nuclear research, and now has large

groups in climatology, Earth sciences and life sciences. A series of transfers of laboratories from one agency to another is likely.

IN2P3 has 18 laboratories and 2,600 staff. It already has close links with CEA.

Although particle physics might at first sight have little to do directly with nuclear research, one IN2P3 official points out that the institute's laboratories have traditionally carried out both particle physics and nuclear research. Observers say the proposal to transfer IN2P3 would regroup CEA's existing laboratories with those of CNRS, and allow a common scientific strategy for nuclear research. IN2P3 would also benefit from acquiring CEA's groups in astrophysics and other areas of basic physics.

Some observers say it is essential that IN2P3 remains semi-autonomous, as otherwise it risks being absorbed within the engineering-oriented strategy

of CEA. Others worry that moving IN2P3 may weaken its links with the universities.

The transfer of the institute would represent the end of the CNRS policy of covering all areas of basic research, and would bring a marked reduction in the size of the agency.

The CNRS's domination of French research is also being challenged by the universities. According to Maurice Gross, CNRS's director of university relations, universities are playing an increasing role in the administration of CNRS laboratories located on their campuses. Research minister Claude Allègre is keen to see the universities having greater control over research.

Jacques Sevin, CNRS director for strategy and programmes, agrees that "there is a risk that the role of CNRS will be reduced". But he says this need not necessarily be detrimental to research.

D. B.