Germany follows science council's advice on closures

[MUNICH] For the first time since reunification, German federal and state governments have accepted without a fight a recommendation of Germany's science council, the Wissenschaftsrat, to close two 'blue-list' research institutes.

Last week, the Bund-Länder Kommission (BLK), which coordinates national and regional science policy, decided to withdraw funding from the Institute for Mineral Oil Research, in Lower Saxony, and the Institute for Child Nutrition, in Dortmund, Nordrhein-Westfalen. The Wissenschaftsrat had judged the quality of research in the two institutes to be low.

The BLK's decision is a boost to the status of the council, an independent government advisory body made up of leading scientists and political representatives, whose advice has often been ignored. Blue-list institutes, which are jointly funded by *Länder* and federal governments, have proved hard to close, partly because of the social costs of doing so.

Since reunification the number of such institutes in Germany has increased dramatically, from 48 to 82 (see *Nature* **379**, 669; 1996). Three years ago, the BLK asked the Wissenschaftsrat to review the scientific quality and administrative efficiency of the institutes. But although the Wissenschaftsrat has so far recommended that funding be withdrawn from 7 of 21 institutes assessed, host *Länder* have, until now, always successfully contested these conclusions.

The BLK's apparent reluctance to take firm action, despite a statement last year from the federal research minister Jürgen Rüttgers that he wanted all Wissenschaftsrat recommendations to be implemented, had caused some council members to question the value of their efforts. "If politicians ask for our advice, we expect it to be heeded," says Michael Maurer, a spokesman for the Wissenschaftsrat, adding that last week's decision "is certainly what we wanted".

Two factors helped the BLK to agree on the closures. The first is Germany's worsening budgetary problem, and the second a recent agreement that redundancy payments should be jointly financed by federal and *Länder* governments, rather than by the host *Länder* alone. "This makes it less difficult to close blue-list institutes," says BLK member Eberhard Wagner.

But the BLK still wavers. Two further institutes recommended for closure received a temporary reprieve last week. An Earth sciences institute in Hannover and an environmental health institute in Düsseldorf have both been asked to present new scientific strategies. **Quirin Schiermeier**

Japanese budget austerity puts science plans at risk

[TOKYO] A stringent fiscal reform package announced last week by a government panel headed by the prime minister, Ryutaro Hashimoto, has thrown into doubt Japan's ambitious plan to increase public-sector funding for science and technology by more than 50 per cent over the next five years.

The fiscal reform plans approved by the cabinet call for severe cuts in government spending to rein in the ballooning national debt which stands at more than ¥400,000 billion (US$3,450 billion). Most of the cuts will be directed at public works spending and overseas development assistance, but science and technology will not escape unscathed.

In June last year, the government approved a plan to increase public-sector funding for science and technology by more than 50 per cent by 2001 (see *Nature* **381**, 725; 1996). This fiscal year's budget, which came into effect on 1 April, accordingly has large increases for all science-related ministries and agencies, in many cases exceeding 10 per cent (see *Nature* **385**, 104; 1997).

But after last week's reform proposal, outlays for next fiscal year are likely to be held to a 5 per cent increase, and increases in subsequent years are likely to be even smaller. According to an official at the ministry of finance, increases may remain low until at least 2003, when the government hopes to achieve its goal of reducing the combined deficits of central and local government to 3 per cent or less of gross domestic product.

The reform plan also states that no new large-scale science projects will be approved during this period of restraint, and existing large-scale projects that are experiencing trouble — such as the Monju fast breeder reactor — will be reviewed and either reduced in scale or terminated.

Futhermore, the panel echoes recent calls for strict external evaluation of public research bodies and projects. In particular, government-funded national research institutes, which constitute only a relatively small portion of the public-sector research system in terms of numbers of researchers, but which consume a large share of the overall research and development budget, are targeted for evaluation and reform.

Such institutes have benefited financially from a series of recent supplementary budgets. But critics argue that money has simply been poured into the purchase of expensive equipment, with little long-term planning or strengthening of research personnel.

The budget recommendations reflect a broader feeling that Japan may not be able to meet its promise to maintain the rapid expansion of its science base. In a recent article, the *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, Japan's influential business newspaper, stirred a debate with an article describing what it called the 'research money bubble', suggesting that it may soon burst as did the investment 'bubble' of the 1980s. **Robert Triendl**

Spending cuts threaten ambitions to host ITER

[TOKYO] Japan's ambitions to host the International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor (ITER) may fall victim to the new calls for restraint in government spending (see above).

Last year, ITER's other partners, the United States, the European Union and Russia, hoped that Japan might come to the rescue of the faltering international project when Japanese officials hinted that Japan might shoulder 70 per cent of construction costs if the reactor is built in Japan (see *Nature* **80**, 655; 1996).

But the fiscal reform package announced by the Japanese government last week specifically states that ITER will not be invited to Japan during the next three years of restraint. Furthermore, an official from the ministry of finance says that funding for such large-scale science projects will remain severely restrained until at least 2003 and probably beyond.

Despite the constraints, officials of the Science and Technology Agency, which funds Japan's participation in the present engineering-design phase of ITER, still hope to host the reactor. "We still want the ITER project to be realized, if possible with Japan as one of the potential hosts," says Satoshi Tanaka, director of the agency's office of fusion energy.

Furthermore, he points out that, in any case, ITER partners are likely to agree to a three-year 'transitory' phase between the end of the engineering-design phase next year and the start of construction because of the financial difficulties that all ITER partners are facing.

The Federation of Economic Organizations (Keidanren), a powerful industry association, also continues to promote the idea of constructing ITER in Japan. A Keidanren spokesman claims that, as a result of Keidanren solicitations, Korean and Taiwanese government agencies are "very keen" on the idea. **Richard Nathan & R. T.**