

# Science Europe lobby group hit by sudden exodus

Brussels-based advocacy group aimed to provide single voice for scientists in the EU – but is losing members.

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29 November 2016



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Michael Matlosz, president of Science Europe, says the advocacy group is not fazed by the sudden exit of many of its influential members.

Influential research organizations are pulling out of Science Europe, the Brussels-based advocacy group that aims to champion researchers' interests with European Union policymakers.

All but one of France's research-funding organizations are preparing to leave the group at the end of this year, *Nature* has learned — including Europe's largest basic-research agency, the CNRS, which controls an annual budget of €3.3 billion (US\$3.5 billion). Germany's Helmholtz Association, which runs 18 national research centres, and France's agricultural research agency (INRA) both left quietly last year.

The loss is "definitely a blow, and may be a deadly one", says Peter Tindemans, the secretary-general of EuroScience, a grassroots association of researchers in Europe. He thinks that Science Europe is struggling to balance the different priorities of its members, because some are grant-awarding organizations, whereas others are institutes that primarily perform research. But Science Europe itself is not fazed by the exits, says its president, Michael Matlosz.

Science Europe was [formed in 2011](#) to give the many national research organizations scattered across Europe a stronger, united voice on EU policy. Collectively, these organizations control most of the continent's basic science funding — but, individually, it can be hard for them to navigate the Brussels lobbying jungle to influence policymakers.

Science Europe runs events to push scientists' interests with politicians, and publishes reports on research policy. In October, for example, it released position papers on the EU's Horizon 2020 funding programme and on open access. At the start of last year, it represented 50 organizations, but by the end of 2016, its membership looks set to have fallen to 43.

## Struggling to be heard

The departing French agencies all declined to comment. But sources familiar with the situation told *Nature* that the organizations filed applications to leave at the end of 2015, to comply with the one-year notice period.

Matlosz told *Nature* that the CNRS and France's atomic energy commission (CEA) are definitely leaving, but that the country's medical research agency, INSERM, and its research institute for development (IRD) haven't yet confirmed their decision. "Science Europe is a living organization, we have members coming out and in," he said. "All members pay an annual fee to be part of our activities, so for many it depends on financial constraints."

Matlosz is also chief executive of the national research agency (ANR), the only French organization that isn't preparing to leave Science Europe. "We are very satisfied with it," says an ANR spokeswoman.

The organizations that left last year give differing reasons for their exits. "In Science Europe, it was very difficult for research organizations to have a voice. At some point, it just ran itself without any involvement of the members," says a member of staff at INRA who was involved in INRA's departure but did not want to be named. "At INRA, we just did not have enough capacity to be in the different work groups, where you have to be strongly involved to be able to give your opinion and influence the organization's processes."

A price hike triggered the exit of the Helmholtz Association. Science Europe's annual fee doubled, causing an internal review of costs and benefits, says Annika Thies, director of the association's Brussels office. "There were several activities we considered to be positive and useful, but others of less relevance for us," she says — although she declined to say what they were.

### **Repeated criticism**

Science Europe has reconfigured itself a few times since its creation — causing rearrangements that have brought criticism from its members. Matlosz is its third president in three years. In 2015, the organization decided to form a single advisory committee consisting of 30 researchers from around Europe, ditching its previous structure of six committees. The final minutes of one of these dissolved groups (which provided the viewpoint of engineering and technical sciences) noted members' regret that "Science Europe does not use the structural importance of its Member Organisations in the European research system to engage more aggressively with the European Commission on policy issues".

The exodus may be a case of history repeating itself. Science Europe was built from two former advocacy groups: the European Science Foundation (ESF) — a funder of coordinated projects between research funders within and outside the EU — and EUROHORCS, which represented the heads of the European research councils. In 2011, many research organizations left the ESF in protest after they failed to achieve a two-thirds majority to reform and strengthen their voices. Science Europe was meant to be a response to this shake-up, with the goal of taking over the ESF's advocacy and lobbying efforts in Brussels.

Tindemans thinks that the dissatisfaction in Science Europe may be due in part to the national funding agencies concentrating on lobbying policymakers, instead of also working together to fund joint projects, as they used to do in the ESF.

Departees from Science Europe have other bodies that can offer them support and influence in Brussels. The Helmholtz Association, for example, is a member of EARTO, the European association of research and technology organizations. INRA, meanwhile, works closely with COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology), a network that supports trans-national cooperation between European researchers.

Meanwhile, Science Europe is readying itself for a busy 2017, Matlosz says, with a focus on the mid-term review of Horizon 2020 and a planned lobbying push to support basic research in the European Research Area. "We continue to have a strong consensus on this among members, so we can speak out strongly."

*Nature* | doi:10.1038/nature.2016.21064