CNRS BUDGET

Researchers' Protest Pays Off, For Now

PARIS—On 18 February, physicist Guy Aubert, director-general of France's Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS), walked into a meeting with his top research chiefs to discuss plans for recruiting scientists and establishing new partnerships with French universities. But he never got to the first item on the agenda. The assembled scientists first wanted a report on CNRS's chronic financial problems, especially the fate of funds that had been frozen by the government. When Aubert admitted that the government was not planning to restore the money, the researchers suspended the meeting, asked Aubert to leave the room, and unanimously passed a series of motions declaring that France's "fundamental research ... would be sacrificed" unless urgent action was taken.

CNRS

In the hot seat. CNRS Director-General Guy Aubert.

Facing the loss of at least $100 million in promised funds and a continuing squeeze on money for laboratories and equipment, "we were quite determined to push [Aubert]," says Jean-Paul Thiery, a developmental biologist at the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris. Committee member Jacqueline Godet, a geneticist at the Claude Bernard University in Lyons, says that in her memory this meeting of CNRS's national research committee was the first in which the 42 members had voted unanimously on anything.

The protest seems to have paid off. Three days later, Aubert met with French research minister François Fillon and emerged with a guarantee that none of CNRS's $2.46 billion budget for 1995 would be withheld. Fillon also promised to restore funds withheld from previous years—although at a pace that will be decided only after the completion of an official audit of the agency's finances in April.

CNRS's budgetary problems stem in large part from the peculiarities of the French accounting system, which makes a distinction between what Aubert calls the "dream money" laboratory directors are told they can spend and the "real money" actually made available. When economic times are good, these figures match. But during the recent hard times, some of the real money has been withheld, creating a gap that has grown steadily with France's economic recession (*Science*, 28 October 1994, p. 536). Even the amount of the total shortfall is unclear: Aubert estimates it at about $100 million, but Thiery and other CNRS scientists argue that it is more than twice that amount.

The squeeze on laboratory costs is especially tight. Although CNRS's 1995 budget was increased by almost 3% over 1994, the additional funds will be more than swallowed up by salaries and purchases of large-scale equipment. Indeed, average funding for the laboratories of CNRS's largest department, life sciences, would shrink by 8%, says Life Sciences Director Pierre Tambourin. The funding crunch has driven many researchers to seek outside support from industry and other government agencies—a solution that brings additional problems. "I depend 80% on external sources," says Thiery. "I have a myriad of small contracts and can only do very short-range projects."

Aubert's agreement with Fillon should help ease these fiscal problems. But there's one major uncertainty. Aubert concedes that the agreement should "not be interpreted to mean that [Fillon] is ready to sign the check," adding that the funds withheld from past years will not be restored "in a single shot just immediately." And that worries many researchers, who note that, with a presidential election coming up in May, Fillon's promise could be overtaken by political events.

Researchers are, however, prepared to keep up the pressure if necessary. The national research committee will meet with Aubert again on 4 March, to take up the suspended agenda and receive a formal report on Aubert's meeting with Fillon. The French researchers say they hope the committee will not have to repeat its dramatic action. The events of 18 February were "absolutely exceptional," says Godet. But, she adds, "they certainly gave Mr. Aubert some strong arguments to defend his position vis-à-vis the minister."

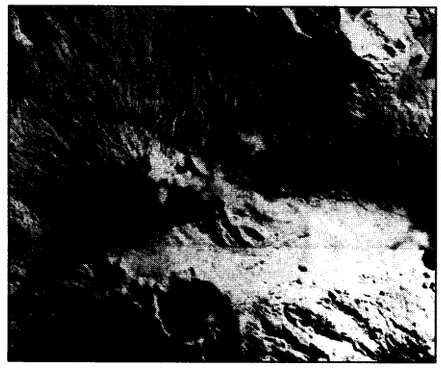
–Michael Balter

GLOBAL CHANGE

Spy Photos Come in From the Cold

Environmental researchers may soon cash in on a dividend from the Cold War—but they'll have to settle for less than full value.

Last week, after 3 years of bureaucratic haggling, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) released the first photos of the former Soviet Union taken by U.S. spy satellites. Data from 800,000 pictures being turned over in the next 18 months could be a boon to researchers studying geologic processes, deforestation, or global warming issues.



DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE

Clear view. Klyuchevskaya Volcano, shown in 1962, is on the Kamchatka Peninsula, until recently off-limits to Western scientists. Its most recent eruption was last November.

But a decision to avoid competing with private companies that plan to launch their own high-resolution satellites will limit the archive to photos taken in the first dozen years of operation, between 1960 and 1972. "The policy meets the minimum interests of the environmental community while writing the rules largely to benefit the commercial spy satellite promoters," says John Pike, an analyst with the Federation of American Scientists.

Even so, the released data are "a nice complement to Landsat," says Ron Beck, a spokesperson for the EROS Data Center in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, which faces the enormous task of cataloging the 800,000 pictures. As the first Landsat spacecraft was launched in 1972, Beck says, "this fills in a 12-year gap."

The photos released last week, for example, provide never-before-seen views of the evaporating Aral Sea in Kazakhstan and a volcano in the eastern Soviet Union. More will follow as EROS researchers begin sorting through the mass of film. Once cataloged, scientists will be able to buy pictures at little more than the cost of a government aerial photograph. On the downside, none are better than 2 meters in resolution. And unlike the digital data produced by the Landsat satellite system, the spy satellite images are on film, which is harder to manipulate.

The decision is a victory for Vice President Al Gore, who began campaigning to declassify the intelligence data when he served in the Senate. At the time, the government was still denying the existence of both the satellites and the organizations that operated them.

–Andrew Lawler