

some express concern that a concerted push to overhaul HCPs could damage conservationists' efforts on Capitol Hill. The more critical groups could be making a mistake "by digging in their heels," says conservation biologist Peter Brussard of the University of Nevada, Reno. "The chances of losing everything are just tremendously large, particularly in this Congress."

These critics point to a few well-regarded plans that, they say, suggest that the HCP process can work. California's Natural Community Conservation Model (NCCM), for instance, an HCP set up to preserve southern California's coastal sage scrub landscape, adheres fairly closely to a blueprint for preserves drafted by a panel of independent scientists, says Murphy, who helped design the plan. Among the NCCM's other strengths, it protects an entire ecosystem, not simply individual species, so the plan should protect the complex web of habitat and processes on which species depend. "I think in terms of paying attention to biological concerns, they did a pretty good job," says University of California, San Diego, ecologist Ted Case of the San Diego plan, one of several county-scale plans being developed

under the NCCM. Brussard also praises an HCP for the desert tortoise in Clark County, Nevada, noting that the plan has "a lot of money behind it" which is being used to maintain federal preserves, and that planners have relied on the advice of an independent scientific adviser.

Stanford's Murphy, who helped draft the California plan, says that more plans would be successful if a few new rules were written into the ESA. First, planners must be permitted to alter the plans if circumstances change or new data become available, wrote the scientists convened by Murphy earlier this year. But landowners should not have to pick up the bill, says Murphy. "No surprises" can work, the scientists' statement said, as long as public funds are used to pay for any revisions. The letter also recommends that the law require that scientists with no vested interests weigh in on the initial design of larger HCPs, especially multispecies plans, and that small plans at least be evaluated in a regional context. The scientists also prescribe that mechanisms for monitoring species be built into the plans. "What we really need is reliable data," Murphy says. "[Long-term, flexible] management is where the science

really comes to bear."

The one thing everyone agrees on is that a dearth of information about how HCPs are doing is clouding the debate. Several organizations, however, have HCP assessments in the works. The Washington, D.C.-based environmental group Defenders of Wildlife has a report due out later this year on 25 HCPs. The Society for Conservation Biology also is planning an HCP project. The American Institute of Biological Sciences (AIBS) and the National Science Foundation-funded Center for Ecological Analysis and Synthesis in Santa Barbara, California, are putting together a 2-year project to examine success stories as well as a few flops. "There is an urgent need for a comprehensive and systematic description and evaluation of existing HCPs," says AIBS President Frances James of Florida State University, Tallahassee, who says the project will involve scientists, environmental lawyers, resource managers, and property-rights advocates.

As James points out, the results may come out too late to influence ESA reauthorization. But given that HCPs appear to be here to stay, the effort surely won't be wasted.

—**Jocelyn Kaiser**

## FRANCE

### Allègre Reenergizes Research Ministry

**PARIS**—Could a shared youthful passion for basketball lead to a healthy future for French science? That, at least, is the hope of many French scientists, after France's newly elected Socialist Prime Minister Lionel Jospin last week named geochemist Claude Allègre to head a new Ministry of National Education, Research, and Technology. Allègre has been good friends with Jospin since their days at the University of Paris in the late 1950s, when the pair devoted their leisure hours to basketball and political activism, and he has also been a longtime Jospin adviser on science and education. During the Socialist government of 1988 to 1993, for example, when Jospin was minister of education, Allègre served as his chief counselor.

Researchers who spoke to *Science* warmly welcomed Allègre's appointment. "It's nice to have a scientist in charge of science again," says microbiologist Richard D'Ari of the Institut Jacques Monod in Paris. The conservatives, who held power from 1993 until their defeat in parliamentary elections earlier this month, had irritated many French researchers by appointing a series of non-scientists to the post. This annoyance turned to outright anger when, 2 years ago, research was demoted to a subministry. Jospin has reinstated

it to Cabinet level under Allègre.

In an interview with *Science*, Allègre said that his first task will be "to reestablish research and higher education as a budgetary



**Top table.** Research Minister Claude Allègre (right), with President Jacques Chirac and Labor Minister Martine Aubry.

priority." The first steps toward that end, he says, will begin this autumn, as the government plans to launch a drive to recruit young scientists and increase financial support for doctoral students. Allègre hopes to reverse a decline in scientific employment in both the universities and France's public research agencies that has plagued the country over the past several years. Allègre also says that the government will reactivate the ambitious university building program that was

cut back severely under the conservative government. And he expects to get the extra money these ambitious measures will cost: "There will be no problem. I will have the money I need."

Among those applauding Allègre's appointment is physicist Hubert Curien, who was research minister under the previous Socialist administration. Allègre "is an extremely innovative scientist and a man with a lot of ideas," says Curien. "We can expect a lot of interesting reforms from him." And astronomer Françoise Pradère of the Paris Observatory says she hopes that Allègre will develop a real policy for research, something she says was missing during the previous government.

Some researchers say privately that they expect heads to roll at France's giant research agencies, the CNRS and INSERM. CNRS Director-General Guy Aubert and INSERM Director-General Claude Griscelli were both appointed by the conservative government and have been closely associated with its cost-cutting policies. But Allègre declines to comment on such speculation, saying only that "it is too early" for such decisions. "For the moment," he says, "we must give new hope to the researchers."

Allègre says he is confident that his old school chum Jospin will back him up all the way: "The prime minister said [research and higher education] will be a priority, so it will be a priority."

—**Michael Balter**