FRENCH SCIENCE

CNRS Unveils New Blueprint

PARIS—Physicist Catherine Bréchignac has kept a low profile since July, when she became director-general of France's largest research organization, the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS). But last week she finally went public, unveiling a blueprint for CNRS's rejuvenation that she had prepared quietly over the past 3 months. At a packed press conference—followed by champagne and eclairs—Bréchignac introduced her new team of scientific directors and her plans to reorganize spending priorities at the agency. Bréchignac said she aims to reverse the recent decline in support for basic research and restore the morale of CNRS researchers: "We are going to give priority to the laboratories and to scientific employment."

ERIC LEGOUHY/CNRS

Going public. CNRS chief Bréchignac.

Bréchignac's plans may not be revolutionary. But they do promise some quick benefits, particularly for junior scientists. The CNRS plans to hire 297 young researchers in 1998 and an additional 250 each year thereafter, ending a hiring freeze enacted by the previous conservative government. And CNRS laboratories will see an overall increase of 2% to 3% in their basic operating subsidies. This might not seem much, but it will be welcome to scientists who have endured a series of brutal budget cuts over the past several years. "We haven't had enough money to run our laboratories," says Nicole Le Douarin, director of the Institute of Cellular and Molecular Embryology in Nogent-sur-Marne, outside Paris. Moreover, Bréchignac said, the most productive labs will do better if they pass muster in a rigorous scientific evaluation she intends to put into place: "Some laboratories will get a sharp increase in funds, while others will remain the same or be diminished."

Bréchignac will have to perform delicate surgery, for CNRS's current budget of $2.45 billion will not grow in 1998 if inflation is taken into account. Major sacrifices may be required among the largest installations, which now absorb about 22% of the agency's research budget. For example, the aging Saturne proton accelerator at Saclay, outside Paris, is already slated to be shut down at the end of this year, and other installations will come under scrutiny. As young scientists are recruited, CNRS will need to guard against further bloating its huge payroll, which soaks up about 80% of the budget. To slim it down, Bréchignac is examining ways of speeding senior scientists into retirement.

Turnover is occurring at the highest levels of CNRS as well. Of the seven scientific department directors Bréchignac introduced at the press conference, three are newly appointed. One of the new faces is cancer researcher Jacques Samarut, who on 31 October will leave his position as director of the Laboratory of Molecular and Cellular Biology in Lyons to replace Pierre Tambourin as head of the CNRS's life sciences department. Bréchignac and Tambourin reportedly have not always seen eye to eye (*Science*, 1 August, p. 627), and researchers are eager to see what changes Samarut might make in the department, which encompasses 25% of CNRS's 11,600 researchers.

In an interview, Samarut said one of his priorities is to boost research at several newly constructed research institutes outside Paris, which he says have been underfinanced during the recent budget crisis. He also intends to lobby the agency to allocate more money to laboratory science, which has become increasingly dependent on outside contracts. "The researchers spend way too much time looking for money," Samarut says. "In my unit [in Lyons], 65% of the budget comes from outside contracts" from 17 sources, he says. "We must increase the percentage of CNRS's contribution to the labs."

But while the new CNRS chief clearly shares this ambition, she seems resigned to working within budget constraints that are unlikely to loosen anytime soon. Says Bréchignac: "We cannot do all the research we would like to do."

–Michael Balter

FUNDING

Canada's Cuts Anger Neuroscientists

OTTAWA—When the Canadian government announced earlier this month that it will ax three multicampus research collaborations it has been funding for the past 8 years, it touched off an angry reaction from neuroscientists around the world. They are upset that the highly respected NeuroSciences Network—a $3.3-million-a-year collaboration based at McGill University—was among the victims, in spite of the fact that an international peer-review panel gave it a strong endorsement earlier this year. Members of the panel say they are "insulted" and "appalled" by the decision, and add that they just can't fathom how the committee that recommended NeuroSciences' demise reached the conclusion that its scientific program was somehow "compromised" and "uneven."

The NeuroSciences Network is one of 10 collaborations currently funded by Canada's Networks of Centres of Excellence (NCE) program, which links research groups at several different universities in joint projects with industry. The NCE program, launched in 1989, won an endorsement from the Canadian government earlier this year when it was given a permanent spot in the budget (*Science*, 14 February, p. 922). With $70 million assured for the next 4 years, Canada's research councils, which provide the bulk of the funding, launched a competition for continued support. NeuroSciences and two others failed to pass muster.

The cuts were recommended by a 14-member selection committee—composed of communications consultants, financial advisers, business leaders, academic administrators, and scientists—chaired by Acadia University President Kelvin Ogilvie. The committee concluded that NeuroSciences' scientific program was "uneven in quality—ranging from outstanding research projects that are clearly internationally competitive to others of lesser quality." The final report also raised concerns about NeuroSciences' management, noting that several projects were "abandoned in midstream without clear explanations," leading to "instability" that could be detrimental to graduate training.

Those conclusions came as a big surprise to members of a distinguished panel that reviewed NeuroSciences for the Ogilvie committee during a 2-day site visit last June. University College of London neuroscientist and Royal Society fellow Raymond Lund, who headed the eight-member panel, said he and his colleagues called it a "model" network and believe it has given Canada a "world profile in this area" while aiding biotechnology and conducting first-rate research. The Lund report urged that NeuroSciences be continued.

Lund considers it "bizarre" that the selection committee ignored a positive, comprehensive report by "hard-nosed" peers. The network's accomplishments, he says, include pioneering work by scientific leader Albert Aguayo on getting "networks of cells in the brain to regenerate their connections using peripheral nerve grafts in the central nervous system." And he says the panel viewed the network's ability to shift gears and discontinue scientific dead ends as a sign of strength and