

EUROPEAN UNION

EU Bodies on Collision Course Over Research Budget

A battle among the European Union's (EU's) three key institutions threatens to disrupt the timetable for the next phase of Europe's multibillion-dollar Framework research program. Last week, the EU's Council of Research Ministers—made up of the top science official from each member country—agreed on a “common position” on the content of Framework 5, which runs from 1998 to 2002. But the council also agreed on a \$13 billion budget—14% less than the amount proposed by the EU's executive, the European Commission (EC), and approved by the European Parliament. “It is a dark day for European research. The sum is lower in real terms than the budget for the Fourth Framework Program,” says Research Commissioner Edith Cresson.

The council's common position will now be debated again by Parliament. But unless Parliament backs down on the budget or comes up with a compromise acceptable to the council, the EU's codecision process, which requires both institutions to agree on the proposals, will have to go through a conciliation procedure that could take months. That could cause a hiatus in EU research funding. “I'm very disappointed at the overall amount. I would be surprised if Parliament accepted it,” says Gordon Adam, a vice chair of the Parliament's research committee. “The figure is quite inappropriate,” says Eryl McNally, another vice chair.

The Framework program funds international collaborations of academic and industrial researchers working on projects that aim to benefit European industry or address common problems such as the environment. It goes through a tortuous approval process every 5 years, when its scope, structure, and budget are debated. That process began for Framework 5 when the commission announced its plans last spring (*Science*, 11 April 1997, p. 188).

Following widespread criticism that previous programs had ranged too broadly, the commission proposed just three themes: unlocking the resources of the living world and the ecosystem, creating a user-friendly information society, and promoting competitive and sustainable growth. Within these themes,

the commission identified 16 focused areas for research, known as “key actions.” It also proposed three additional “horizontal” programs that would guide all Framework 5 research: confirming the international role of EU research, innovation and participation of small and medium-sized enterprises, and improving human potential and the socioeconomic knowledge base.

Negotiations over Framework 5 ran into trouble when the commission announced its first budget proposal late last year, totaling \$15 billion. Parliament debated the plans in December and recommended an increase

for participation in the proposed single European currency. Germany, France, the United Kingdom, Sweden, and Austria all wanted an even bigger cut, to less than \$13 billion. “It's a considerable achievement by the council to get an agreement at all,” says Adam.

The council also made changes to the content of Framework 5. Over the past year, some scientists have complained that areas of research strongly supported by the EU in the past, such as marine science, appeared to be missing from the new, streamlined Framework 5. “We are furious about it. Oceanography was barely mentioned in the original plans for Framework 5. Eighty percent of funding in Greece for environmental research comes from the EU,” says marine researcher Tassos Tselepidis of the Institute of Marine Science of Crete, in Iraklion. “A lot has been achieved over the past 10 years in getting people to work together

on major collaborative projects. There's a great deal of concern over Framework 5,” adds oceanographer Joachim Tintore of the University of the Balearics in Spain.

It was in response to such concerns that the Parliament added the fourth research theme, focusing on environmental issues together with energy. And at last week's meeting, the ministers further beefed up this area. It divided environment and energy into two subdivisions, each with its own budget and management committee, and added two new actions, one of which is devoted to sustainable marine ecosystems.

But while the three institutions now seem to be close to agreement on the content, they are far apart on the budget. Because Framework 4 funds will dry up at the end of the

year, there is pressure to reach agreement on the budget and detailed contents of Framework 5 quickly so the commission can make the first call for research proposals. But many observers believe the Parliament is likely to make a fight of it. “The Parliament wants to be a strong partner in the codecision process. I'm afraid it isn't likely to accept the council's common position,” says Miguel Royo, a spokesperson for research in Spain's EU delegation in Brussels. “We are worried that spending on research and development has been tending to go down. There's a lot of unease in Parliament, particularly as U.S. spending is going up,” says Adam.

—Nigel Williams

EC FRAMEWORK PROGRAM 1998–2002		
Goals	Council's budget (millions)	Proposed cut
Improving the quality of life and the management of living resources	\$2050	–15.5%
Creating a user-friendly information society	\$3090	–14.3%
Promoting competitive and sustainable growth	\$2190	–22.9%
Energy, environment, and sustainable development	\$1880	–2.4%
International role	\$410	–6.7%
Innovation and SMEs	\$320	0%
Human potential	\$1100	–14.1%
Joint Research Centre	\$630	–15.6%
EURATOM PROGRAM (NUCLEAR ENERGY RESEARCH)		
Goals	Council's budget (millions)	Proposed cut
Fusion and fission	\$900	–14.2%
Joint Research Centre	\$260	–13.8%
TOTAL	\$12,840	–14.1%

SOURCE: EUROPEAN COMMISSION

from three to four research themes and a budget of \$15.3 billion. The commission announced its revised proposals last month, but these angered parliamentarians who felt that their recommendations—particularly on how much should be spent in each area—had been overlooked.

But this wrangling has now been overtaken by the council's effort to slash the overall budget. One civil servant involved in the negotiations says some countries feel that investment in national research programs provides better value than Framework, which needs to improve its efficiency. And many countries are striving to reduce their spending to meet strict requirements