

official cover-ups of accidents and mishandling of radioactive material at nuclear power research facilities have caused public faith in government research institutes to plummet, he says, and an inspection system "could reassure residents." —DENNIS NORMILE

EUROPEAN UNION

Cresson Told to Explain Questioned Contracts

The European Commission's head of research, Edith Cresson, was called last week before the European Parliament's research committee to answer allegations that a personal friend from her home town of Châtelleraut, France, had been given consultancy contracts with the commission for work he may not have been best qualified to carry out. Rene Berthelot, a dentist, had been contracted to gather information on the state of research in France. But Cresson, who sent a deputy to answer the committee's questions, told *Science* this week that Berthelot had been the right person for the work.

Cresson's decision not to appear before the committee angered some members. "In the Netherlands if a minister is called to answer questions by Parliament they come straight away," says Dutch member Elly Plooy van Gorsel. Cresson's deputy, Hendrik Tent, told the committee that Berthelot was not merely a dentist but had additional medical and legal qualifications, and that he was hired in the normal way. But his short statement failed to satisfy all members, and the committee insisted that Cresson submit a written statement herself. "There's nothing wrong with awarding a contract to someone you know who is qualified," says committee member Giles Chichester, "but if it is a personal friend, then it is a different matter. It looks like cronyism."

Cresson, a former French prime minister, is the head of directorate-general XII (DGXII), which is responsible for the European Union's science, research, and development activities, including the current 5-year, \$15 billion Framework program, which covers everything from nuclear fusion to biotechnology. The contracts were awarded by DGXII to Berthelot soon after Cresson's appointment in 1995. Cresson says that she was unhappy with the large number of priority research topics she inherited and wanted urgently to assess the state of research. "I wanted someone to look at AIDS, cancer, and also technical innovations to help us

focus priorities." Berthelot had the networking skills to gather information quickly and reliably, she says.

The timing of the allegations, which first surfaced in the press, was unfortunate for Cresson. The commission and Parliament are currently locked in combat over a number of financial problems and accusations of corruption, focused largely on contracts for humanitarian aid carried out by the Luxembourg arm of a company run by businessman George Perry. Audit inquiries allegedly have failed to account for millions of dollars of commission funds and Luxembourg police are investigating the so-called Perrylux affair. Berthelot had once worked for Perry as a consultant, and the French



No show. EU commissioner Edith Cresson.

newspaper *Liberation* published an article last week linking Cresson, via Berthelot's DGXII contracts, to the "real mess" she says surrounds humanitarian funds. Tent told the committee that Berthelot's work had nothing to do with the Perrylux affair, and Cresson says she is suing the newspaper.

Two members of the science committee, Claude Desama and Gordon Adam, say Cresson does not need to defend herself any further. "I felt we had been given a full explanation," says Adam.

But others want more specific information about whether the normal process had been followed in hiring Berthelot. Says Wim van Velzen: "There have been serious allegations in the press, and it is only normal that Parliament asks for Mrs. Cresson's response. If she does not provide us with a formal statement in due course, I will ask her to appear before the House after all."

—NIGEL WILLIAMS

ECOLOGY

Bug Vanquishes Species

For the first time, scientists have documented a case of an infection wiping out the last remnants of an entire species. The victim was a type of land snail that scientists were

trying to pull back from the brink of extinction in a captive-breeding program. Experts say the finding, reported in this month's issue of *Conservation Biology*, points up the urgent need to guard against infectious diseases when nursing species off the endangered list. "Captive breeding is not always a safe haven," says conservation biologist Stuart Pimm of the Univer-

sity of Tennessee, Knoxville.

South Pacific land snails are rare to begin with, but they have taken a hit in the last few decades after residents of Raiatea, in the Society Island chain some 5000 kilometers south of Hawaii, began importing predatory snails from Florida in 1986 to eat another imported snail that had become a pest. The predators, it turned out, preferred the taste of the native snails, and by 1991 they had driven several species to the brink of extinction.

That year Paul Pearce-Kelly and colleagues at the Zoological Society of London captured the last known individuals of one species—*Partula turgida*—to try to save them through a breeding program. But 4 years ago the snails began dying off mysteriously. When the population had dwindled from 296 individuals to fewer than 10, veterinary pathologist Andrew Cunningham of the Institute of Zoology in London and parasitologist Peter Daszak of Kingston University in Kingston-upon-Thames, England, set out to find out why.

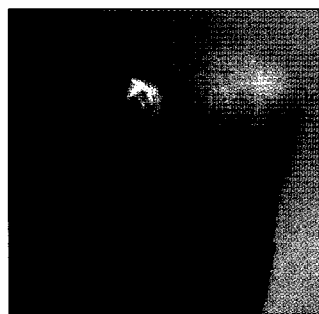
Before they could solve the puzzle, however, the remaining snails had died. After slicing open the last five bodies, Cunningham noticed something odd: scads of protozoan-like spores in the digestive glands and reproductive tracts, suggesting that a parasite had infected the snails. Daszak put the spores under an electron microscope and spotted spiral tubes—a hallmark feature of Microsporidia, a family of protozoa known to infect aquatic snails. Closer scrutiny revealed that the spores belong to a new species of microsporidian in the genus *Steinhausia*. The parasite had ravaged the snails' digestive glands, Daszak says, persuasive enough evidence for him and Cunningham to conclude that it had finished off the snails. Because the apparent killer does not seem to infect other land snails, by killing off *P. turgida* it may have sealed its own fate.

"It's great that somebody's finally got a concrete example of an infectious disease leading to the extinction of a species," says ecologist Andy Dobson of Princeton University. He says the finding should serve notice to endangered-species recovery programs

that they must closely monitor the cause of death of individuals in their care. And the snail's demise hammers home the danger of allowing a species to slip so far that it has vanished from its habitat and ended up on captive-breeding life support. Says Pimm, "Species need to be in the wild, not in zoos."

—DAN FERBER

Dan Ferber is a science writer in Urbana, Illinois.



Tiny victim. A protozoan appears to have finished off *P. turgida*.