

Divergences between MEPs and Council Presidency on additional funding for the 4th RTD Framework Programme

MEPs Rolf Linkohr, Claude Desame, Godelieve Quisthoudt-Rowohl and Detlev Samland, influential members of the EP Committee on Research and Energy, have called for additional funding of 200 mEcu for the EU 4th. RTD Framework

Programme for the years 1997 and 1998. However, Hans Wijers, the Dutch minister and current President of the Research Council, said that 100 mEcu is the most the Council could allocate. The European Commission reduced its initial proposal of 700 mEcu to 100 mEcu and received the ministers' approval. Mr Wijers explained to the MEPs that the Council had even been reluctant to spend an extra 100 mEcu, and that the debate had been "extremely difficult". He warned Parliament that "if discussions are prolonged, the outcome might be even worse; an extra 100 mEcu is not much, but 0 mEcu is nothing".

Mr Wijers also reported to the EP that the first point on the agenda of the upcoming sessions of the Energy Council would be the directive concerning the establishment of the internal market for natural gas. He is planning to present a compromise proposal around Easter, and shall seek to achieve political consensus on it before the end of the Dutch presidency (30 June 1997).

EU Research Commission embarks on a new phase in preparation of the 5th Framework Programme

The European Commission will approve its second working document in preparation of the future 5th framework programme on Research and Technological Development in the EU, to cover the period 1999–2002. The formal proposal is ex-

pected in March 1997. The working document details the scientific activities which, in the Commission's opinion, should be financed by the EU as part of the six chosen priorities: living resources and resources of the ecosystems, information society, competitive and sustainable growth, international cooperation, innovation and participation of SMEs, and increase in human potential.

European Commission recommends the 5th Framework Programme (1999–2003) focus on health, food, multimedia content, mobility and cities-proposed timeframe

On an initiative by Commissioner Edith Cresson, the European Commission has determined guidelines and the overall content of its forthcoming proposal for the Fifth Research and Technological Development Framework Programme that will enter into force in 1999. The adopted working paper confirms the Commission's intentions of organising the framework programme into six major programmes (see above), including three "thematic" ones (life sciences and the ecosystem, information society, competitive and sustainable growth) and three "horizontal" programmes (international cooperation, innovation and participation of SMEs, improvement of human potential). A number of key actions on subjects such as health and food, multimedia content, sustainable mobility and intermodality, and the city of tomorrow, will be included in the framework programme. The Commission has not proposed a budget at this stage.

The Commission is of the view that the fifth framework programme must mark a break with earlier programmes. It should reflect a "desire to focus European research efforts on a small number of top-

ics to tie in with the Union's key economic and social needs". The key actions would be designed to "mobilize a wide spectrum of disciplines, knowledge and technologies". Each programme would include activities aimed at developing generic technologies and basic research. A fresh look would also be taken at support for research infrastructures in Europe.

The research actions would concentrate in particular on growth areas likely to create jobs and increase the competitiveness of European industry. More flexibility will be allowed and the budget will be released on a gradual basis in response to unforeseen needs, such as the mad cow crisis of recent months. Particular attention will be granted to innovation, the use of research findings and the participation of SMEs in the programme (for example, activities designed to facilitate access to venture capital and support for the creation of innovative enterprises).

On the basis of this working paper and the conclusions of an assessment report on present research activities, the Commission will present its formal proposal in late March for the fifth framework programme. The assessment report will be drawn up by an expert group chaired by Etienne Davignon and is due to be published this month. The next Research Council meeting will be on 14th May.

The Commission expects the fifth framework programme to be formally adopted in the spring of 1998. The first calls for proposals will be sent out at the end of 1998 and projects will start up at the beginning of 1999. However, the financial perspectives for the entire EU budget after 1999 will not be reviewed until that year, consequently, availability of the budget for the framework will be difficult to foresee, which risks complicating the decision-making process. *Agence EUROPE, Brussels 1997*

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