

NEWS OF THE WEEK

was preparing this week to rubber-stamp the budget decision by the upper house.

The Senate budget contained \$1.6 billion for public research organizations, a cut of 1.6%, and level funding of \$6.3 billion for universities. Fixed costs such as salaries and operating expenses consume most of the budget, leaving ongoing research projects most

of the board,” says physicist Alfonso Franciosi, chair of the National Committee for Synchrotron Radiation Research at the National Institute for the Physics of Matter (INFM). Facing a 30% cut, INFM will be forced to slash its contribution to the Elettra x-ray synchrotron in Trieste, which each year hosts 800 researchers from across Europe. Elettra could be shut down temporarily as early as next month. INFM officials are also wondering how to meet their \$11-million-a-year obligation to other European x-ray and neutron projects, among them the European Synchrotron Radiation Facility, the Institute Laue-Langevin neutron source, both in Grenoble, and the future European Spallation Source.

The National Institute for Nuclear Physics says it will be able to maintain its subscription to major facilities such as the CERN particle physics lab near Geneva, despite a 10% cut. But it will have to reduce its contribution to the building of several detectors for the Large Hadron Collider there, reports physicist Carlo Bernardini of the University of Rome.

Researchers say that the new cuts only underscore the country’s status as the stepchild of European research. Italy spends less than 1% of its gross national product on research, about half the European average. Nobelist Carlo Rubbia, whose National Agency for New Technologies, Energy, and the Environment faces a 15% cut, says that Italy is “marginal both in Europe and in the world in the field of science.”

—ALEXANDER HELLEMANS

Alexander Hellemans is a writer in Naples, Italy.



vulnerable to cuts, says Rino Falcone, an artificial-intelligence researcher at CNR.

It is not just the level of funding that has angered researchers. They are also incensed that the Ministry of Finance has proposed raising additional funds for universities by increasing the state tax on cigarettes. “I don’t agree with people smoking to finance my research,” says oncologist Alfredo Budillon of the University of Naples. Scientists are also galled by a government proposal to create a \$98 million special science fund distributed at the personal discretion of Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi. “This is a new attack on the autonomy of the scientific community and its institutions,” says Falcone. Parliament was expected to vote this week on both proposals.

CNR, with about 100 research centers throughout Italy, will receive \$477 million, about 2.5% less than in 2002, says Capogrossi Colognesi. But the actual impact on science will be greater because its shrunken budget must cover raises written into existing labor agreements. CNR recently announced that it might have to rescind its membership in the European Science Foundation, and other international collaborations might also be sacrificed.

The government gave no explanation for why some organizations were hit much harder than others. “It is very hard to understand what the original motivations for these moves are, apart from trying to cut budgets across

RESEARCH FUNDING

Italian Researchers Facing Lean Times

NAPLES—Italian researchers are distraught this week after legislators approved a 2003 budget that could shutter some national facilities and threaten Italy’s contributions to major international research centers. “It is the worst situation in research in Italy since [World War II],” says legal historian Luigi Capogrossi Colognesi, a member of the governing council of the National Research Council (CNR), the country’s largest research organization.

The parliamentary vote came after days of heated debate in the Senate, punctuated by outraged researchers demonstrating noisily outside and a mass resignation by university rectors, who say that a written commitment to adequate funding is the only thing that will bring them back. The chamber of deputies