

Potocnik seeks pay-off for SMEs in twin Eureka plans

The Commission has outlined two new proposals that it hopes will enable it to work more closely with Eureka, the intergovernmental initiative that supports near-market R&D.

Speaking at a Eureka meeting last week, Janez Potocnik said the Commission was considering whether to set up a "common pot" to fund R&D projects for small and medium-sized enterprises under article 169 of the EU treaties. The Research Commissioner added that plans were also under discussion for more collaboration between Eureka clusters and the European Technology Platforms. Both mechanisms are public-private research partnerships in high-tech sectors and they often involve the same firms.

The new Article 169 initiative would allow member countries to contribute into a "common pot" for R&D projects. The Commission would be able to add Framework 7 cash and the money in the pot would be distributed by Eureka.

Eureka would set up a new organisation in 2006 to deal with the Article 169 money and this would issue calls for proposals using the methods and rules of Eureka programmes.

Only the SMEs of countries that put money into the pot would be entitled to apply for funds. Svatopluk Halada, head of the Czech secretariat set to take over the chairmanship on 1 July, said that 22 Eureka countries had expressed an interest in joining the common pot. A decision on whether that scheme will go ahead is due by September.

Michel Vieillefosse, head of the Eureka secretariat, said the scheme offered the Commission the opportunity to increase the proportion of small businesses taking part in the Framework programmes. Only 10 per cent of companies that participate in Framework 6 are SMEs, he says. In contrast, 40 per cent of companies that participate in Eureka are SMEs. He says SMEs are attracted to Eureka because it offers close contact in their own national language and cheaper, simpler application procedures.

"You can't put in for 10 calls for tender and get one - no company can afford that," Vieillefosse said.

While the Commission would gain improved SME participation in Framework 7 through the common pot scheme, the initiative would also provide new money to countries where the Eureka programme is struggling to secure funding from their national governments.

The second proposal put forward by the Commission, would see the work of Eureka's clusters coordinated with the Commission's Technology Platforms—and possibly

Joint Technology Initiatives. The aim would be to avoid both sides funding the same activities and to promote collaboration between firms in the two groupings.

As an example, Vieillefosse said two of the proposed JTIs were in areas that overlapped with the work of the MEDEA+ Eureka cluster in microelectronics and the ITEA cluster on software-intensive systems. "Eureka would retain its independence but there would be a forum for the exchange of information [with the Technology Platforms]," he said.

The level of collaboration between the Eureka clusters and JTIs would be determined by how much funding each JTI received, he added.

"Clusters may be taken into account [in the Technology Platform strategic research agendas] but how much work can be done with Eureka will depend on the budget for the JTIs," said Vieillefosse. Eureka clusters are to be consulted on their role within Framework 7 on 15 June.

IN A RESOLUTION drafted at the end of the Eureka inter-parliamentary conference last week, delegates called for national governments to provide "substantial levels" of funding to Eureka.

Kris Douma, member of the Dutch parliament and co-chair of the conference, said, "There were fears that national funding [for Eureka] in some countries was too low. If we are to take the Lisbon strategy seriously, we have to redefine the priorities within the EU rather than taking money from the Eureka budget."

In a pointed reference during his speech, Potocnik said, "Even if Member States have not supported Eureka as effectively as they could have done in recent years, I am convinced Eureka can remain a strong framework for catalysing R&D in Europe."

The future Czech Eureka chairmanship sees advantages in working more closely with the Commission. While Halada agrees that Eureka offers the advantage of proposals and guidance being in national languages, he says that working with the Commission might offer more continuity.

"My personal view is that a little weakness [of Eureka] is the rotating chair," said Halada.

But Vieillefosse says the Commission is unlikely to suggest Eureka be absorbed within the Technology Platforms in future.

"Today in the clusters, industry is very happy," he said. "Industry is investing 60 per cent of the money and they [the Commission] don't want to destroy that."