

European research area: activities within the scope of the EC framework programme 2002-2006

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The committee adopted the report by Gérard CAUDRON (PES, F) amending the proposal under the codecision procedure (1st reading). Although it endorsed the total budget for the framework programme proposed by the Commission (EUR 16.27 billion), it modified the overall budgetary structure of the programme and added many details to the different sections ("priority thematic areas"), particularly as regards health research. On health, MEPS wanted the chapter on "Genomics and biotechnology for health" to be renamed "Life sciences for health and safety" and to be subdivided into two parts: "Genomics and biotechnology for global and health and welfare" and "The major diseases" (i.e. research into the more traditional diseases, such as cancer, cardiovascular diseases, etc., as well as poverty-linked diseases such as malaria, AIDS and tuberculosis). The committee also adopted a large number of amendments on ethical questions. It said that funding should not be provided for such areas as human cloning for reproductive purposes, the creation of embryos for research purposes, and research activity intended to modify the genetic heritage of human beings for eugenic purposes. However, it said that research into the use of human stem cells could be financed depending both on the nature of the scientific proposal and the legal framework of the Member State(s) involved. Funding could also be provided for research on embryo or foetal stem cells deriving from miscarriages or therapeutic abortion and for research on 'supernumerary' human embryos, provided that such research was legally permitted in the Member State in question. In addition, funding should be allowed for research promoting the understanding of legal, ethical and social implications of the new discoveries in the field of human genetics. The committee also wanted to change the structure of the chapter entitled "Sustainable development and global change" and proposed instead that it be divided into three parts: "Energy"; "Sustainable Development and Global Change"; and "Transport". The latter part would concern land and sea transport and was therefore an addition to the Commission proposal which had focused only on air transport, under the chapter "Aeronautics and space". MEPs argued that the situation on Europe's roads - and above all its railways - was in serious need of improvement. In other shifts of emphasis, the committee wanted the chapter on food safety and health risks to include food quality and health improvement and the chapter on "Citizens and governance in the European knowledge-based society" to be renamed "Citizens, democracy, social and political institutions". The committee also adopted an amendment creating a new instrument, to be known as the "stairway to excellence", to improve the practical functioning of the Framework Programme. The idea was to enable potential participants in research fields in their infancy to evolve into more advanced "centres of excellence". Lastly, MEPs felt that the old instruments of the existing 5th framework programme should not be abandoned completely, and wanted a smooth transition between the 5th and the 6th framework programmes.