

that this plan will save only £1 million more than would be saved by keeping open both observatories at reduced size. "What I strongly contest is that the extra savings [gained by merging the observatories] are adequate to justify the disruption to programs," says Martin Rees, who holds the honorary title of astronomer royal and is based at the University of Cambridge.

Both observatories are involved in building the international twin 8-meter optical-infrared Gemini telescopes that will be located in Hawaii and Chile. These activities "will start to tail off next year," says PPARC CEO Ken Pounds. "PPARC will then have too many people for the work we can afford." But Rees, who until last March was a member of PPARC's governing council, questions "such pessimistic projections" and claims that "PPARC has not adequately debated how its budget should be apportioned between particle physics, space- and ground-based astronomy."

The savings gained from merging the observatories will be used to support both ground- and space-based university astronomy research, according to Pounds, who is an x-ray space astronomer.

The UK Astronomy Technology Centre is scheduled to open in Edinburgh next spring. A PPARC panel chose Edinburgh over Cambridge—and thus the ROE over the RGO—because the ROE "more closely matches [PPARC's] current and future programme requirements . . . with the necessary skill mix." Roughly, the ROE's strengths lie in infrared and submillimeter optics, while the RGO's are in optical wavelengths and telescope design, according to astronomer Dave Carter of Liverpool John Moores University (JMU). The panel also deemed the RGO's business activities—developing and building robotic telescopes in collaboration with JMU—too financially risky.

In an attempt to save the RGO from becoming a museum, the observatory's management and staff want to start a business with the RGO name that would collect and distribute astronomical data, engage in public outreach and continue to design and build robotic telescopes. "It would be complementary, not in competition, with the technology center," says Wall, who will present a business proposal to PPARC later this month. Staff members at the observatory are "cautiously optimistic," says RGO astronomer and staff representative Margaret Penston. "There is still the anxiety about how many posts the new organization will have and what they will be."

TONI FEDER

Newest NOAA Research Ship Studies Pacific Rainfall

The *Ronald H. Brown* is the latest research ship to be added to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's fleet. On 21 July, the *Brown* (named for the late secretary of commerce) set off on its first scientific mission, to a tropical region in the eastern Pacific Ocean that has a strong, but not accurately measured, influence on global weather patterns. The data collected will be used to resolve discrepancies between satellite microwave measurements (which show the region to be one of the world's rainiest) and satellite infrared measurements (which indicate much less rainfall).

According to the mission's chief scientist, Sandra Yuter of the University of Washington, the 274-foot ship is equipped to conduct both atmospheric and oceanographic research, making it unique in the US research fleet. The crew is recording and archiving data from all the ship's atmospheric and oceanographic sensors, and that data will later be made available to the research community.

Reached at sea by e-mail in early August, Yuter said the boat was still in transit to its station location at about 8° N, 125° W, and had been experiencing high winds and rain brought by Hurricane Guillermo. The ship had also taken on some uninvited guests: a group of boobies. "The relation between the birds and the science crew has been strained," she noted. "When we make our hourly weather observations, we present an easy target on deck. Some of the science crew have taken to wearing their rain gear as a precautionary measure."

The *Brown*'s next mission will be to study hydrothermal vents off the Pacific Northwest coast of the US. Information on the *Brown* and on Yuter's study can be found on the World Wide Web at <http://www.pmc.noaa.gov/rb/> and at <http://www.atmos.washington.edu/gcg/MG/tepps>.

JEAN KUMAGAI



Bréchnac Becomes First Woman to Head CNRS

About a month after Claude Allègre became science minister in France's new socialist government, he chose physicist Catherine Bréchnac to head up the country's—and Europe's—largest research organization, the National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS). Bréchnac, who took over from Guy Aubert on 18 July, is the first woman to serve as the organization's director general.

Bréchnac's appointment has been welcomed by the French scientific community. "She is a well-established scientist with an excellent record of administration and a great passion for science," says Jean-Pierre Bourguignon, a mathematician at the Institut des Hautes Etudes Scientifiques near Paris and a former member of CNRS's scientific council. "She is very straightforward, and is able to listen to people," he adds.

These qualities should be useful for running the mammoth organization during a period of anticipated reforms. CNRS has seven departments in the social, life, physical and mathematical sciences with about 11 600 researchers,

and over 25 000 employees in total. In 1996, the organization's budget was about \$2.2 billion.

Allègre

wants to reduce the bureaucracy and increase the number of researchers at CNRS, according to his special adviser, Vincent Courtillot.

That means, says Bourguignon, "Bréchnac will have to transform these guidelines into actual measures." It's clear, he adds, "that Allègre's office will fight hard to get the research budget back to the top of the government's priority list." Courtillot, who was preparing CNRS's budget for next year as PHYSICS TODAY went to press, would say only, "In the 1998 budget, the government will place emphasis on increasing soft money for labs and on new positions for young researchers."

It's expected that Bréchnac will emphasize basic research, and also strengthen CNRS's ties to universities and industry. According to Gérard Mégie, an atmospheric physicist at



ERIC LECOQ

C. BRÉCHNAC