

France strives for sharper image

As US biotechnology companies seek to expand or relocate their operations abroad, Paris is pitching itself as a scientifically strategic location. **Rex Dalton** reports.

The many enticements of Paris are set for a difficult challenge: can they attract operating facilities from Californian biotechnology companies to move there?

Just three months ago, the French capital's regional government opened an office in San Francisco to urge entrepreneurial firms to choose to invest in Paris, rather than China, India or Britain. In a world where intellectual property can be moved instantaneously from place to place, laboratories can be built anywhere, and French officials would like to see more of them built in France. "We will be talking to everyone, from the life sciences to information technologies," says Frederic Le Roux, director of the new office.

The exercise is the latest example of strenuous efforts being made by France to build stronger links in science, technology and innovation with its veritable ally and occasional sparring partner — the United States. The moves attempt to overcome Americans' concerns about high costs, language and bureaucracy in France, by highlighting the excellence of its scientists and engineers.

Delegation skills

The international outsourcing of animal testing, clinical trials and even laboratory research has been a growing trend in Californian biotechnology firms. Indeed, academics from the state who have commercial ideas now often develop them through 'virtual companies', which have only a handful of US employees, and subcontract out their research and other operations, often to overseas contractors.

China, India and other locations in Asia are the main destinations for such 'offshoring'. And although Paris may be perceived in the United States as a cultural nirvana, French employment laws and high European salaries make it a less-than-obvious candidate for biotechnology expansion.

"France has an enormous advantage: it does very good research in great laboratories," observes Joseph Panetta, president of Biocom, San Diego's 470-member trade group. "But where I and my chief executive colleagues have questions, is in its ability to create and sustain an entrepreneurial environment like that of California."



French research chief Christian Bréchet: seeks closer ties with US scientists.

Collaboration between US scientists and their French colleagues is already widespread. And US biotechnology companies consider France's huge, state-run healthcare system to be an attractive environment for conducting clinical trials. Some companies have already set up shop there: PDL BioPharma of Fremont, California, for example, which is developing drugs for various illnesses including autoimmune disease and inflammation, opened up an office in Paris two years ago.

But the Paris Regional International Mission Enterprise (PRIME) office in San Francisco is designed to take these interactions to a higher level. Its small team of staff will prowl university hallways and biotechnology firms in California and promote Paris's benefits over those of Bangalore or Shanghai. Tax breaks and legal assistance will be on offer to companies ready to make the move.

"Paris recognizes the unique productivity of the California biotechnology pipeline," says Matthew Gardner, president of the 350-member BayBio of South San Francisco. "Downstream, the possibilities are huge" for

compounds and technologies that can be developed commercially.

The move by PRIME coincides with efforts by INSERM, France's main biomedical research agency, to strengthen scientific collaboration with the United States. An administrative structure has already been created for scientists from INSERM to keep their positions in France while they work abroad, and INSERM labs have been established in Kyoto, Japan; Haifa, Israel; Montreal, Canada; and Glasgow, Scotland.

In June, INSERM is expected to approve a proposal to station French scientists in labs at US universities. If approved, the first lab would employ 15–20 French researchers, specialize in neuroscience, and be directed by Emiliana Borrelli, an Italian neuroscientist who worked for 15 years in France and is now a faculty member at the University of California, Irvine.

Overseas experience

"I really believe that the future of INSERM research will rely on international expansion," says Christian Bréchet, director-general of INSERM. "The idea is to provide for the sustainable development of projects," he says, adding that participating INSERM scientists will be offered up to two four-year appointments, with a scientific review halfway through the eight years, he adds.

Borrelli's husband, Paolo Sassone-Corsi, is chair of the pharmacology department at the Irvine campus, and will be collaborating with the new lab. "Science should have no frontiers," says Borrelli. "But it can be hard for French scientists to move around. This new lab can help."

Two more INSERM labs, led by immunologist Jacques Banchereau at Baylor University in Dallas, Texas, and cell biologist Bruno Peault at the University of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, could also get the go-ahead in the months ahead.

But even as the scientific links grow stronger between biologists in France and the United States, US biotechnology leaders remain doubtful about France's attractions as a location for offshoring. "France has a very socialistic system," says Panetta, who once worked for a Californian firm, Mycogen, near Paris. "There is a lack of willingness to take risks on venture capital and company formation. They don't necessarily encourage entrepreneurialism; some discourage it." ■

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