

UK rejoins key European science program after post-Brexit row

September 7 2023, by Helen ROWE



London and the EU agreed the UK can rejoin the EU's Horizon science program.

Britain and the EU said on Thursday they had struck a pact to allow British scientists back into the world's largest civilian science research program after being frozen out in a post-Brexit row.

Scientists hailed the agreement, which will see the UK rejoin the Horizon Europe scheme, as "a great day" and a relief after two-and-a-half years of "uncertainty", raising hopes among anti-Brexit campaigners of further closer collaboration with the European Union.

London had said it had been excluded from the scheme that funds research projects due to wrangling with Brussels over post-Brexit trading arrangements in Northern Ireland.

But following a call on Wednesday, UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen announced that Britain was rejoining under what was billed as a "bespoke deal".

Nobel laureate Paul Nurse, director of the Francis Crick Institute, said he was "thrilled to finally see that partnerships with EU scientists can continue".

The government said rejoining Horizon would give the country's scientists "unrivalled opportunities" at a good price for British taxpayers.

The EU estimates the UK will contribute almost 2.6 billion euros (\$2.8 billion, 2.2 billion pounds) per year on average to Horizon Europe and the Copernicus satellite monitoring system, from January 1 next year.

But it will not have to pay for the time it was locked out of the program.

"As part of the new deal negotiated over the last six months, the prime minister has secured improved financial terms of association to Horizon Europe that are right for the UK," the government said.

Von der Leyen said the EU and the UK were "key strategic partners and allies and today's agreement proves that point".

"We will continue to be at the forefront of global science and research," she added.

'Great day'

The deal means that UK researchers can apply immediately for grants and bid to take part in projects under the Horizon scheme, which is the world's largest civil research and innovation program.

It has a budget of 95.5 billion euros from the 27-member EU alone, and contributions from associated partner countries, funding research into areas such as health crises and climate change.

Under the new deal, the UK will not be involved with the bloc's nuclear technology scheme, Euratom.

Instead it will "take forward its own fusion energy strategy", Downing Street said.

The announcement was given an enthusiastic welcome across the UK scientific community.

"This is a great day for researchers in the UK and across Europe," said a joint statement from the Academy of Medical Sciences, the British Academy, the Royal Academy of Engineering and the Royal Society.

"The Horizon program is a beacon of international collaboration and UK-based academic and industrial researchers will now be back at the heart of that," they added.

Obstacles

Cancer Research UK chief executive Michelle Mitchell said the EU and UK should now "work with urgency to rebuild the strong position the UK occupied in the Horizon program".

"There will be relief throughout the research community that the uncertainty of the last two-and-a-half years has come to an end," she said.

The UK government launched dispute proceedings against the EU last year over its exclusion from Horizon, considering it a breach of the Brexit trade deal it signed in December 2020.

It argued that its inability to participate in science and technology programs was causing "serious damage" both in the UK and EU countries.

But the EU maintained it was not obliged to make the UK an associate member on such programs, and refused to allow membership until London honored its commitments under the deal in full.

The EU said a new deal struck for trade in Northern Ireland "allowed association talks to resume".

"Therefore it is now time to move forward with the final steps for associating the UK."

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