

# Climate scientists flock to France's call

President said 'Make Our Planet Great Again' — and researchers signed up.

**Declan Butler**

18 July 2017



*Stephen Crowley/NYT/Redux/eyevine*

French President Emmanuel Macron (right) with his US counterpart, Donald Trump.

Hundreds of climate scientists, including many from the United States, have applied to work in France under a €60-million (US\$69-million) scheme set up by the country's president, Emmanuel Macron, after his US counterpart Donald Trump rejected the Paris accord on global warming. And Germany has announced that it will set up a similar programme to lure researchers.

Macron launched his 'Make Our Planet Great Again' initiative on 8 June, seeking to entice researchers in other countries to France with offers of 4-year grants worth up to €1.5 million. Six weeks on, the programme has

been flooded with applicants, says Anne Peyroche, a biologist and the chief research officer of the CNRS, France's national basic-research agency.

"Applications continue to come in every hour," she says. Most applied for relatively short sabbaticals in France, but the 154 scientists attracted by longer-term stays of four years or more are of most interest to the initiative's organizers, Peyroche says. France is also headhunting some top climate scientists individually, she adds. The scheme will shortlist as many as 80 scientists by mid-September, with 50 or so winners to be announced around the end of November.

## **Visionaries wanted**

### **Related stories**

- [Macron consolidates electoral victory](#)
- [Trump pulls United States out of Paris climate agreement](#)
- [Macron presidency is a welcome experiment](#)

One applicant is Ashley Ballantyne, a bioclimatologist at the University of Montana in Missoula. His proposal involves laying the foundation for a global integrated carbon-observing network, combining satellite and atmospheric data to seek insights into how ecosystems respond to climate change. "There are very few funding opportunities in the United States that promote research on carbon-climate interactions at the global scale, so the fact this programme was looking for visionary thinking was appealing," he says.

Ballantyne has long had informal collaborations with French and other European scientists, including at the renowned Laboratory of Climate and Environmental Sciences (LSCE) at Gif-sur-Yvette near Paris. His principal motivation for applying was the opportunity to strengthen and formalize these ties, he says.

The French offer is a "very attractive proposition for many scientists in the US", says Kim Cobb, a palaeoclimatologist at the Georgia Institute of Technology in Atlanta. US climate science is under pressure, she adds: scientists are waiting to hear whether Congress will approve Trump's proposed drastic cuts to the field. Cobb says that, were she not a tenured scientist working in an exceptional research environment, she

would be "jumping at the opportunity" to work in France.

### **German backing**

Officials in Germany announced on 13 July that they will establish a scheme to operate alongside the French programme. The German fund will comprise **€15 million of government money**, matched by a sum from the country's participating research organizations. The details of the programme have not yet been finalized, but Germany's research ministry has **created a website** for interested scientists to sign up to receive details. Peyroche says that the German fund will target younger or more-junior scientists than its French counterpart.

Climate scientists in France support Macron's strong political and diplomatic stance on the Paris agreement. But a vocal minority of researchers argue that the scheme is largely a public-relations exercise to boost France's image abroad, even while research funds at home are scarce. The French government last week proposed trimming the 2017 budget for research and higher education by €331 million, as part of more than €3 billion of cuts in public spending to pay for new initiatives without increasing the national deficit. (The cuts for research activities are distributed across several ministries, from agriculture to defence; the research and higher education ministry itself will see only a €180-million reduction in its €23.85-billion budget, says its minister Frédérique Vidal.)

On 13 July, France's Conference of University Presidents said in a **statement** that it "deplored" what it described as "incomprehensible" cuts. "These numbers should make any foreign scientist wonder about the generous invitation of President Macron to relocate to France," says Patrick Lemaire, a biologist at the University of Montpellier and founder of the researcher-led campaign group Sciences en Marche. "The cuts are a warning that the scientific environment they would find in France may be very far from the one they are promised."

But Sacha Wunsch-Vincent, an economist at the World Intellectual Property Organization in Geneva, Switzerland, says that Macron's prominent overtures to foreign scientists and entrepreneurs are helping to promote France as a good place to do research and innovation, which is important for attracting top talent. "There is a seismic shift in the branding of France," he says.

*Nature* **547**, 269 (20 July 2017) doi:10.1038/nature.2017.22318

