

Franco-Norwegian research cooperation turns 30

The French-Norwegian Foundation, which turns 30 in 2013, is always seeking new ways to promote research cooperation between France and Norway. The Oil&Space project is a classic example.

“The idea is to establish contacts and try to draw upon the synergies between Norwegian petroleum technology and French aerospace technology,”



explains Jan Erik Strand, who chairs the Foundation. “Both are major industries in their respective countries and must deal with some of the same challenges, such as strict safety requirements and the need for advanced technology.”

Popular conference

The French-Norwegian Foundation, in cooperation with the Embassy of France in Norway and the French-Norwegian Chamber of Commerce, took the initiative to launch the Oil&Space project. A kick-off conference held in Oslo in April this year was attended by over 110 participants from the two countries, representing companies, research institutions, and business clusters.

“The conference was an unconditional success,” continues Mr Strand. “We originally thought this would only appeal to a limited circle of specially interested parties, but clearly we’ve hit upon a real need. As a rule, small and medium-sized companies don’t have specific arenas where they can meet larger companies. It can be difficult to find an ‘in’ with the big players. The Oil&Space project provides a helpful means of establishing contact points.”

Common needs



François-Xavier Lannuzel, Science and Technology Attaché at the Embassy of France, believes there is great potential in this kind of cooperation. He points to a number of areas where research collaboration between the French aerospace industry and the Norwegian petroleum industry could be productive.

“These industries share many similar challenges, such as operating under extreme conditions and the need for heavy-duty yet sophisticated, high-tech

solutions. Also, both industries have very stringent safety requirements for protecting both people and the environment.”

Leading the way to collaboration

A few months into the Oil&Space project, signs of fruitful ripple effects are already emerging in the form of bilateral meetings and technology transfer agreements between Norwegian and French companies and research groups. Mr Strand has found seminars to be a dynamic format, and plans to follow up the project with a seminar in Toulouse this autumn.

“Traditionally we have mainly supported specific projects that the actors have brought to us. We will continue doing so, but we would also like to facilitate activities like this one, where we can offer arenas for French and Norwegian actors to meet, learn about each other’s approaches and problems, and start up projects together. I see that there are many common threads across a wide range of industrial and technological areas.”

Valuable instrument

Mr Lannuzel points out that Norway and France have a long history of research collaboration and a project success rate well above average. He also stresses the important role of the French-Norwegian Foundation in this cooperation.

“Good instruments are essential to encouraging and supporting cooperation on research and innovation. The Foundation is both a symbol of the two governments’ willingness to promote scientific exchange and a very pragmatic instrument for promoting it.”

Origins in petroleum and energy

Since its establishment in 1983, the French-Norwegian Foundation has fostered over 120 bilateral research projects for a total of roughly NOK 470 million. NOK 92 million of this has been public funding from Norway and NOK 97 million has been public funding from France, while the companies and R&D institutions carrying out the projects have contributed NOK 281 million. Randi Aarekol Basmadjian, who heads the Foundation secretariat, explains that activities in the early years of the Foundation were predominantly focused on the petroleum and energy sector.

“The primary motivation for launching the French-Norwegian Foundation had its origin in France’s interest in resources on the continental shelf, on the one hand, and Norway’s interest in technology cooperation on the other,” says Ms Basmadjian. “But now, joint projects on materials, ICT and aquaculture are the most common.”

“In addition to funding for cooperation,” continues Ms Basmadjian, “the Foundation can provide useful input for starting up new projects through its large network of contacts from French and Norwegian authorities, public agencies and companies. There have been some radical changes in the European research funding landscape since 1983, but the value of a bilateral cooperation

instrument such as the French-Norwegian Foundation remains quite meaningful. To ensure optimal results of the Foundation's activities, the board has recently decided to review its organisation and objectives to assess whether any changes are in order."