



May 20, 2005

Dear Colleague:

The NSF Astronomical Sciences division recently announced its intention to conduct a formal review of its senior astronomy facilities later this year. (See announcement at http://www.aura-astronomy.org/nv/NSF_Senior_Review_NOAO_NSQ.pdf.) The explicit purpose of the senior review is to “re-balance” NSF investments in current facilities so that funds can be directed to the new projects defined in the 2000 decadal survey—principally, ALMA operations, LSST, GSMT, and SKA. In the optical/infrared arena, NSF is asking NOAO to prioritize each component of its total program and to analyze the costs and benefits—financial, scientific, and strategic—of retaining (or eliminating) each component. As AST director Wayne Van Citters states in his letter to AURA: “*No facilities will be considered to be off the table.*”

Quite independently of this senior review, NOAO has already initiated transition measures to re-focus the resources necessary to realize the O/IR decadal survey projects: i.e., GSMT, LSST, and NVO. Rather than closing telescopes, we have begun setting up partnerships to manage portions of our older facilities, either in exchange for the operating funds needed to retain some fraction of the telescope for public access, or for more powerful instrumentation that will also benefit the broader community.

We have made no secret of the direction in which we believe NOAO—and the federally-funded portion of OIR astronomical research—should be heading to remain competitive in the next 10–15 years. Planning for the evolution of NOAO facilities, articulated in our Long-range Plan (<http://www.noao.edu/dir/lrplan/>), derives from broad community comment, review, and oversight from such groups as the AURA Observatory Council, our own NOAO Users’ Committee, and the NSF-appointed Program Review Panel, among others. Indeed, following another recommendation of the decadal survey, NSF asked NOAO to convene a blue-ribbon advisory group, the OIR-Long Range Planning Committee, specifically charged with recommending federal funding strategies for public participation in the decadal survey projects. (See: <http://www.noao.edu/dir/lrplan/lrp-committee.html> to comment on that committee’s draft report.) Obviously, some transformation in current facilities needs to take place for a unified U.S. OIR telescope “system” to function efficiently in the face of flat AST budgets and well-funded international competition.

The purpose of this letter is to solicit your views on these vital issues that will, in no small way, shape the direction of publicly-funded observational astronomy in the next two decades. Please comment on these and any other topics you would like to see incorporated in NOAO’s response to the senior review—either with members of the NOAO staff (at our booth at the AAS meeting) or by e-mail to srinput@noao.edu.

Sincerely yours,

Jeremy R. Mould
Director