

Statement from AURA on the Report of the NSF's Astronomy Portfolio Review Committee

The Association of Universities for Research in Astronomy (AURA), which has been a key steward of US national optical and infrared (OIR) astronomical facilities for over 50 years, has reviewed the recent Astronomy Portfolio Review presented to the National Science Foundation. There is no doubt that the funding for astronomy at NSF has not achieved the scenario envisioned by the Decadal Survey. If that situation is not rectified, then hard choices have to be implemented. The Portfolio Review is responsive to its charge to identify such choices. The review team's excellent synthesis and summary of the science of the coming decades identified critical capabilities necessary to achieve that science.

We are gratified to see the high priority accorded to many of the AURA-managed observatories, namely the Gemini Observatory, the Blanco telescope at Cerro Tololo International Observatory (part of the National Optical Astronomy Observatory, or NOAO), the future Large Synoptic Survey Telescope (LSST), and the National Solar Observatory's Advanced Technology Solar Telescope (ATST) and Dunn Solar Telescope. The high priority of these telescopes is a testament to their scientific productivity and future potential, the dedicated staff at our facilities, and to the NSF for supporting these observatories. NOAO will continue to be the portal to all NSF-funded open access nights on US facilities and NSO will play a lead role for the ground-based solar community.

While acknowledging that Kitt Peak has been a mainstay of US OIR astronomy, with over 800 open-access nights annually, the report recommends divestiture of the Mayall, WIYN, and the 2.1 m telescopes, as well as closure of the McMath-Pierce solar telescope (the only solar thermal infrared facility until ATST comes online). The Mayall remains one of the most productive ground-based facilities, with the highest impact per dollar ratio of any OIR telescope. The Mayall will only grow more important as it transitions to hosting the BigBOSS dark energy survey, a collaborative project between NOAO, NSF, the Department of Energy, and the US astronomical community. AURA will work to identify appropriate partnerships to continue some programs at Kitt Peak, the Mayall in particular.

AURA has been a staunch defender of open access to the skies for the broad US and international astronomical community as a valuable component of astronomical research, along with the NSF grants program. We share the goals of the Portfolio Review to develop a balance between grants and facilities, and between existing facilities and advanced future capabilities. We are concerned, however, about the potential loss of science due to diminished access to telescopes and will work to mitigate these effects.

Implementation of the Portfolio Review must pay special attention to maintaining US leadership in instrumentation, and to retaining the talented scientists, engineers, and program managers from our national observatories as some facilities phase out. The report suggests structural changes to the instrumentation programs at the national

observatories. AURA will work closely with the NSF on this complex issue. Also key is the need to support new, state-of-the-art facilities such as ATST, LSST, GSMT, and other top priorities for ground-based observations in the recent decadal surveys for astronomy, planetary science, and solar physics.

In the coming months, AURA will work closely with the NSF to ensure the best possible portfolio of facilities for the community.

AURA is a non-profit consortium of universities and institutions that operates astronomical facilities on behalf of NASA and the National Science Foundation.

Contact:

William S. Smith, Jr.
President
Association of Universities for Research in Astronomy
Email: wsmith@aura-astronomy.org
Phone: (202) 483-2101