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Britain may leave Gemini, after all

Astronomers, fixing priorities, favour new projects over old

BRITISH ASTRONOMERS HAVE been asked to identify their top priorities and could be set to dump the international Gemini Observatory in order to redirect funding at new projects, it emerged last week.

The astronomers face tough choices in the coming months as they try to agree on a 10-year strategy for ground-based telescopes. At a meeting held in London last week to discuss these priorities, it was clear that some projects will have to go, under the Science and Technology Facilities Council's strained budget.

The first to lose out could be Gemini, which operates two 8-metre telescopes in Hawaii and Chile. Support for the project appears to be waning, with some participants calling into question the competence of the international board that runs the project. "We still believe in it, but it is lower down our list of priorities these days," said Chris Evans of the UK Astronomy Technology Centre in Edinburgh. "We need to look at the long term, and not just at maintaining the facilities we already have."

Others have been frustrated by a previous, lengthy consultation process to agree on some of the next generation of instruments for its two telescopes, with several UK universities heavily involved in their design. "These have been dropped and that is disappointing for them," said Evans.

Evans's comments were echoed, publicly or privately, by other astronomers at the 9 July meeting, which was organised by Michael Rowan-Robinson, an Imperial College astronomer who is undertaking a review of ground-based astronomy until 2020 for the STFC.

The STFC will decide by November, when the Gemini board next meets, whether Britain will continue its £5 million annual contribution to Gemini's operating costs after 2012. And despite the anger voiced by some astronomers two years ago, when the STFC said it might withdraw from Gemini, several scientists say that they would now accept that outcome.

The top two new projects up for consideration in the decadal plan are the European Extremely Large Telescope, in the pipeline at the European Southern Observatory in Chile, and the Square Kilometre Array,

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a radio telescope to be built in either Australia or South Africa. Both will be expensive and would demand a substantial contribution from the UK: some estimate about £100m for the E-ELT alone.

Rowan-Robinson warned attendees at the meeting that convincing the Treasury to spend this amount of money is going to take a structured effort. "I know there is a certain weariness when it comes to reiterating the economic impact of our work. But if we want funding for this project, we've got to show that this £100m will create UK jobs, not just at the telescopes."

Rowan-Robinson advised the group to learn from how particle physicists have made the case that the Large Hadron Collider is worthwhile as a training bed and an incubator of innovative ideas, as well as a scientific instrument. He warned that the whole community will have to get behind one, or both, of the new instruments, and that the push to make a case for them will have to start very soon indeed. He also suggested that the community tries to drum up interest from research councils other than the STFC, in order to win funding from the government's Large Facilities Capital Fund.

Rowan-Robinson told *Research Fortnight* that he wants the strategy to send "a strong message" to the STFC. "This review is for making a case for ground-based astronomy in the years ahead," he says. "I suspect it will impact on the STFC's funding choices in the next spending review."

However some ground-based astronomers fear that governments may be more inclined to support space-based activities, so they could lose their funding to increased investments the European Space Agency's programme. EU ministers have already agreed to increase investments in space-based research, and ground-based astronomers say privately that this could encroach on the STFC spending on telescopes.