

AURA Statement Regarding Recompetition

November 1, 2011

AURA applauds the efforts of NSF to further refine the criteria by which expiring agreements and contracts are re-competed. It is important to identify clearly the expected benefits of a recompetition and place these in a broader list of priorities for accomplishing the NSF mission.

AURA recognizes that a recompetition can have a very positive effect in reinvigorating the management of NSF facilities. This can be accomplished either by changing the managing organization or effecting changes in the incumbent managing organization. In the period 2000-2002, the NSF undertook a recompetition of the National Optical Astronomy Observatory and the National Solar Observatory. This recompetition was justified and based on the concern that NOAO was not an effective national organization. AURA strongly internalized this criticism and undertook a fundamental redefinition of the mission and purpose of NOAO.

The result was that the AURA proposal, which included a vision of NOAO as a national leader promoting a “system” of US observing capabilities, was successful and has been pursued since 2003 as the mission of NOAO. It is clear that this recompetition was an effective exercise for the NSF and for AURA in re-focusing the NOAO mission.

The NSF depends on its managing organizations to carry out the NSF mission and to act as the primary interface with the community. In this context, AURA recommends that the primary emphasis be placed on building effective national organizations and enabling the community to conduct transformative science. A recompetition at the managing organization level is one tool for accomplishing this, but there are others that must also be available. Some examples of alternatives to recompetition include the following:

- Recently a major change in the Gemini Observatory has been carried out through a close working collaboration between AURA, the managing organization, the Gemini Observatory management, and the Gemini Board and NSF. This change was made necessary by the withdrawal of the UK from the international partnership. It is doubtful that this change could have been accomplished through a recompetition, it required the development of a strong consensus among all of the stakeholders.
- The US Decadal Survey for Astronomy and Astrophysics, *New Worlds, New Horizons*, has recommended a merger of NOAO and Gemini in order to achieve cost savings and to put in place a stronger US national observatory. Such a merger would strongly affect the conduct of competitions for NOAO and for Gemini as separate organizations. The Decadal Survey

recognized that the benefits of building such a strong consolidated organization should be the primary consideration by the NSF. The convenience of a recompetition should not impede the consolidation of organizational elements that lead to stronger national organizations.

- The National Solar Observatory represents a case that is common within the NSF. NSO, under AURA management, undertook a strong effort to define and promote the Advanced Technology Solar Telescope which achieved a new start within the NSF. It is crucial to continue this management arrangement throughout construction. Major procurements and agreements exist between AURA and the vendors that would be extremely difficult to novate or re-negotiate.

A recompetition is justified when the managing organization is not performing in an effective manner, when it is not responsive to changing needs, or when it is unable to transform itself. A recompetition affects far more than the top level managing organization, it affects the entire staff. It is important that this be done in a manner that fully incorporates community input.

AURA recommends that NSF Management Reviews include as part of their charge an explicit requirement to make recommendations on whether it is appropriate to re compete in specific expiring cooperative agreements. Although the NSF is free to make a different decision, it is crucial that the user communities be fully engaged.