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Montana State University 2005

January 31, 2007

Dr. Wayne Van Citters
Director, Division of Astronomical Sciences
National Science Foundation
4201 Wilson Boulevard
Arlington, Virginia 22230

Dear Wayne,

We are writing to comment on the upcoming cost reviews the NSF will conduct at the recommendation of the Senior Review. As members of AURA's Observatory Council charged with conducting oversight over NOAO, we are frequently engaged in detailed discussions and reviews of every aspect of NOAO operations. Many of us are also users of these facilities and have a first hand knowledge of their workings.

We support an objective and thorough process to assess whether the cost of these observatories are reasonable in light of their missions, their organizational structures, and their obligations as public institutions. Although it is important to review alternative operations models for each of NSF's observatories, it is also crucial that these reviews include the possible outcome that no cost reductions are feasible without compromising the core mission.

We are concerned that an overriding focus on cost savings might become a mandated outcome. We would like to request that you instruct whatever group you engage in this process to place as the highest priority the continued functioning of these observatories and delivery of adequate services to the community. Cost savings, per se, should be subject to those conditions. We would also like to request that you include in your charge the possible identification of critical areas that are near the breaking point. Indeed, the experience of many in the community has been that mountain top operations, including technical support and equipment maintenance, may already be in this situation.

Sincerely,

You-Hua Chu, *University of Illinois*
Stanley Dermott, *University of Florida*
Andrea Dupree, *Harvard University*
Karen Kwitter, *Williams College*
Robert Millis, *Lowell Observatory*
Robert Rood, *University of Virginia*

Hernan Quintana, *Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile*
William Smith, *ex officio, AURA*
Paula Szkody, *University of Washington*
Tony Tyson, *University of California Davis*
Frank Winkler, *Middlebury College*