



**Statement by  
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President, Association of Universities for Research in Astronomy**

**Before the  
Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Agencies  
U.S. House of Representatives**

**April 2, 2008**

I appreciate the opportunity to provide testimony on behalf of the Association of Universities for Research in Astronomy (AURA). AURA was founded in 1957 as a consortium of Universities dedicated to advancing the field of astronomy. Today, AURA consists of 40 member institutions and we manage four major observatories on behalf of the NSF and NASA: the National Optical Astronomy Observatory located in Kitt Peak Arizona and in Chile; the Gemini Observatory located on Mauna Kea Hawaii, and in Chile; the National Solar Observatory located at Sac Peak New Mexico and Kitt Peak Arizona; and the Space Telescope Science Institute located on the campus of Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland.

AURA's observatories, and others funded by NSF and NASA, contribute to one of the most important and visible areas of the Nation's science portfolio. There is no question that astronomy plays a major role in garnering public interest in science. Understanding the origin and evolution of the universe, the possibility for other habitable planets, and probing the unknown forces of nature are the most compelling questions of our time, not only for scientists, but for humankind.

Astronomy also plays a major role in the Nation's competitiveness and contributes strongly to the objectives of the American Competitiveness Initiative (ACI). Our investments in basic research have returned enormous dividends both in terms of our economic growth and our intellectual heritage. Astronomy, and other elements of the ACI, have a powerful effect in drawing students into the fields of math and science and strongly promote the development of an educated work force.

AURA welcomed the bipartisan passage of the America COMPETES Act of 2007 which sought to provide a statutory basis for the ACI. In particular it put in place a commitment to double research in the physical sciences. The outcome of the FY08 Appropriations cycle was a disappointment to many. NSF in particular has been strongly impacted inasmuch as it will be difficult to plan for carrying out important future programs without some confidence that the budget for science will grow.

AURA strongly believes that it is essential for the NSF to carry out high priority programs such as the Advanced Technology Solar Telescope, the Large Synoptic Survey Telescope, and the Giant Segmented Mirror Telescope. These were identified as the highest priority initiatives in the Astronomy and Astrophysics Decadal Survey in 2000, yet progress has been slow due to minimal growth in the NSF budget.

The ACI, for the first time in NSF's history, set forth a long range budget beginning in FY2006 that, by doubling, would accomplish much throughout the agency, including these programs in astronomy. The FY08 Omnibus Appropriations bill, sharply limited the overall NSF request.

AURA commends the conferees, however, in including language that encouraged the NSF to fully fund the request level for astronomy, despite this overall reduction. The conferees also included an explicit recognition of the emerging issue of currency exchange rate fluctuations and their adverse effect on science programs that operate from off shore locations. AURA has experienced a major impact in operating our facilities in Chile for this reason. We believe that many other inherently international science programs are suffering from this same factor. There is a common need to establish a mechanism that can buffer such programs from adverse currency fluctuations. These provisions within the FY08 Appropriations report were extremely encouraging. We hope that the Committee continues to focus attention on these matters.

For FY09, the Administration is again proposing to put NSF back on the original doubling track recommended in the ACI and in the America COMPETES Act. We strongly recommend that the NSF be funded at this request level.

For NASA, we are all looking forward to the up-coming Hubble servicing mission which this committee has consistently supported. With two new instruments, upgraded gyroscopes, batteries and guiders, as well as attempting to repair two of the telescopes workhorse instruments NASA and the Astronaut crew will bring the Hubble Space Telescope to the apex of its performance. AURA will be doing its part to ensure at least five more years of spectacular science will continue to flow to the astronomical community and to the American people who have been consistent partners in this great Hubble adventure. This request also provides for much needed funding for the James Webb Space Telescope, the successor to the Hubble Space Telescope during its most critical year. This year the project will be considered by a Non-Advocate Review for confirmation as a full construction program. The project has progressed well and, together with the reserve funding that has been budgeted for, will continue on track for a launch in 2013.

AURA commends the Committee for its leadership and its support for science.

