

AAO ADVISORY COMMITTEE PUBLIC UPDATE

The AAOAC held its 5th meeting on 21& 22 March 2013 at the AAT at Siding Spring.

In-Camera session with Incoming Director of the AAO

Dr Rosalind Dubs was elected as acting Chair for the meeting so as to allow Professor Couch to both discuss with the AAOAC his plans and priorities, and also to receive advice from the Committee. The AAOAC formally congratulated Professor Couch on his appointment. He briefed the Committee on issues he had reflected on before taking up office, of which the major ones were pending instrumentation decisions, and sustainable operational recovery from the bushfires, the latter in cooperation with the ANU. The AAOAC also discussed the proposed AAO Outreach Strategy, and commends the incoming Director's intention to introduce a more formal organizational structure around outreach.

AAO Operations and Bushfire Recovery

The AAOAC congratulated the Operations Manager on his outstanding effort in managing the January bushfire emergency at Siding Spring and subsequent recovery. The Committee also commended the Acting Director under whose leadership the AAT returned to full observing just one month later. The AAOAC attended a joint AAO/ANU function on the evening of 21 March to thank the emergency services in Coonabarabran for their efforts in saving the Siding Spring Observatory. Approximately 200 people attended the function at the Coonabarabran Bowling Club where two Rural Fire Services (RFS) representatives, on behalf of the emergency services, were given awards in recognition of their efforts. At a lunch time function at the AAT, AAO staff member and RFS volunteer, Wayne Clarke, was awarded a Departmental Certificate of Commendation for his special efforts in saving several properties after the main fire-front had passed through the Timor Road area of Coonabarabran.

One very beneficial outcome of the bushfire emergency has been the move to remote AAT observing from North Ryde. The AAOAC encouraged management to rapidly resolve remaining IT security issues, which would allow the number of remote observing sites to be expanded for the benefit of more users. While increasing observing efficiency in this manner, regular workshops and other mechanisms should be considered to maintain interaction between astronomers and AAT support staff.

AAO Science

The number of publications and continued high level of research productivity was noted. The Committee requested that statistics on the use of the AAT as a research facility, and research output by FTE be provided at the next meeting.

Instrumentation, Instrument Science and UK Schmidt upgrade

The AAOAC was briefed on progress with HERMES, and noted that several approaches to address the unacceptable wavefront quality for the VPH gratings were being investigated. This is leading edge R&D which requires a highly challenging technical solution. The Committee encouraged the continued use of “earned value” reports for the larger, non-R&D projects. Time delays were being mitigated via an early move of the instrument to Siding Spring Observatory in April.

The Committee queried the scientific findings likely from PRAXIS, which aims to test the OH suppression fibre feed. It also believes that the science case for TAIPAN (on a refurbished UK Schmidt Telescope) needs to be more forcefully restated, including the synergies with ASKAP leading to the SKA, and with ESO facilities. The Committee advised that the TAIPAN/Schmidt suite of initiatives may require reprioritization in the context of Australia’s needs for international telescope access (see below), and urged the incoming Director to review the project prior to LIEF grant submission.

Information Technology and Administration

The AAOAC noted the recent restructure of the IT group. It was advised that a full replanning of activity and scheduling was underway. The Committee believes that the new management approach will accelerate production of the document set required for closer ISM compliance, and also commends the improved efficiency of day-to-day operations through more sustainable teamwork between the North Ryde and Siding Spring IT staff.

AAO Forward Look Implementation

This item commenced with a valuable high level discussion on how to maintain and increase access to larger international telescopes, with decisions pending on funding to facilitate access to large optical telescopes such as Gemini, Magellan or potentially those provided by ESO. As indicated in the *AAO Forward Look to 2015*, the evolution of the AAO’s role both as operator of Australia’s national optical astronomy facilities, and in providing support for Australian users’ operational access to overseas large telescopes, depends on hard decisions being taken at Government level as soon as possible.

The AAOAC stresses the seriousness of these choices to high impact Australian optical astronomy research beyond 2015, and with options closing fast, the urgency of Government determining and signalling internationally its response to these matters which are critical to the maintenance of Australia’s substantial international research reputation in astronomy.

The Committee further advises that it considers a unified response from both radio- and optical/IR-astronomy communities will be critical in assisting Government to prioritise funding options in the currently constrained fiscal environment. In this context, it is imperative that stakeholders work to draw out the many benefits to the Australian economy of access to these international facilities.