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Future Dimming for Puerto Rico Telescope

By **BEN FOX**
The Associated Press
Wednesday, December 6, 2006; 3:21 AM

ARECIBO, Puerto Rico -- At the world's largest radio telescope, astronomers searching for asteroids on a collision course with Earth are bracing for a more worldly threat: The steepest budget cuts and first layoffs since the observatory opened in 1963.

Managers are warning staff and outside astronomers to prepare for a leaner future, with fewer research projects and less telescope time available as they finish a costly repainting job amid a looming cut in U.S. government funding.

"This place will change dramatically," Robert L. Brown, director of the National Astronomy and Ionosphere Center, which includes the observatory, said in a recent interview.

The Arecibo radio telescope, with its signature 1,000-foot reflector dish set in a jungle-like landscape, is best known as a setting in "Contact," a 1997 Jodie Foster movie based on the Carl Sagan book about the search for extraterrestrial life _ a hunt that still takes place at the observatory.

It also gained fame in the 1995 James Bond movie "Goldeneye," in which the telescope's platform, suspended like a giant steel spider 450 feet above the dish, figured in a climactic fight scene.

Day-to-day activities at the observatory, which is

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Robert L. Brown, director of the National Astronomy and Ionosphere Center, stands at the end of a walkway suspended hundreds of feet above the world's largest radio telescope, in Arecibo, Puerto Rico, Nov. 16, 2006. Astronomers here searching for asteroids on a collision course with

Robert L. Brown, director of the National Astronomy and Ionosphere Center, stands at the end of a walkway suspended hundreds of feet above the world's largest radio telescope, in Arecibo, Puerto Rico, Nov. 16, 2006. Astronomers here searching for asteroids on a collision course with Earth are bracing for a more worldly threat: The steepest budget cuts and first layoffs since the observatory opened in 1963. (AP Photo/Brennan Linsley) (Brennan Linsley - AP)

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managed by Cornell University, are less cinematic. Unlike optical telescopes that visually scan the skies, the telescope at Arecibo receives and processes natural radio signals emitted by planets, stars and other objects.

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As the world's largest, it is more sensitive than any other radio telescope and can detect more and fainter objects in space. By bouncing radio waves off asteroids, it also charts their location, speed, course and some other characteristics.

"The whole world loses if funding is lost for Arecibo," said Lance Benner, a research scientist at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, Calif. He uses the telescope to track near-earth asteroids. "We're a very inexpensive form of insurance for the whole planet."

The telescope is so prized that astronomers let out a collective shudder in November when a review panel recommended the U.S. cut 25 percent of the observatory's \$10.5 million astronomy budget next year and consider eliminating it entirely at the end of the decade. The panel suggested that the private sector or overseas institutions could pay part of Arecibo's costs

"So many of us use the results that come out of there that we are very concerned," said Brother Guy Consolmagno, an astronomer at the Vatican Observatory in Castel Gandolfo, Italy. "There is nothing that can come close to what it can do."

National Science Foundation officials commissioned the review panel to find ways to pay for new projects at a time when Congress isn't likely to increase the research budget, said Wayne Van Citters, director of the agency's astronomy division.

"They concluded that we simply could not keep everything that we currently support going at the time that we pursued the extremely ambitious future program before us," Van Citters said.

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