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- SPORTS
- ARTS & LIVING
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Page 2 of 2 < Back
Future Dimming for Puerto Rico Telescope

Those future programs include the U.S. share of an international radio telescope under construction in the Atacama Desert of Chile. When it opens around 2011, it will be the largest observatory ever built.

The \$30 million in proposed cuts from the NSF's overall \$200 million astronomy budget were spread out over a number of programs through the end of the decade to avoid "irreparable harm" to the nation's astronomy research, he said. The NSF is still reviewing the panel's recommendations.

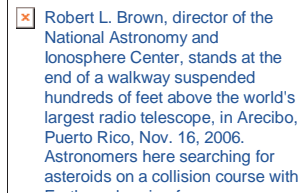
But Arecibo is already scrimping to repaint the telescope, a \$5 million project that officials say must be done now to prevent the steel from corroding in the humid air of northwestern Puerto Rico.

The facility, which was built by the U.S. Air Force, will borrow the money and pay it back over the next three years by cutting 25 percent from its astronomy budget, Brown said.

Twenty to 30 positions will be lost, including some science and support staff, as well as about a quarter of the approximately 100 astronomy research projects done annually at the center. The telescope's annual operating time will be reduced by 1,000 hours, he said.

The situation will become much worse if the NSF recommends the U.S. cut Arecibo's budget by

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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 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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another 25 percent. Cornell officials planned to lobby Congress to maintain the funding.

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"With this kind of cutback, it would be difficult to sustain any kind of long-term operation," said Mike Nolan, another astronomer who tracks near-Earth asteroids.

The deeper cuts wouldn't force the Arecibo complex to close entirely _ at least not immediately. The visitor center, which is self-sustaining and draws about 120,000 visitors per year, would remain open and the research on the upper atmosphere _ the ionosphere _ would remain since its funding comes from another source.

Officials at the observatory, however, say it is unlikely they would be able to replace the lost U.S. funding for astronomy, the largest portion of Arecibo's budget. The most likely outcome would be a gradual phasing-out of astronomy work.

"We're going to hold out as long as we can and try to convince people that it would be foolish to do that," Nolan said.

On the Net:

<http://www.naic.edu/>

<http://www.nsf.gov/mps/ast/seniorreview/sr-report.pdf>

< Back 1 2

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