

# The Royal Astronomical Society Declares Support For UK Involvement In Aurora

July 29 2004

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## *Should the UK participate in the European Space Agency's future Exploration Programme [Aurora]?*

This is one of the key questions currently being debated by the scientific community, the UK research councils, parliamentarians and industry.

Over the past few months, Dr. Sarah Dunkin, Vice President of the Royal Astronomical Society (RAS), has been leading a working party to discuss the future of planetary science in the UK.

Following the deliberations of this working party, and in view of the impressive scientific case for a leading British involvement in the programme, the RAS Council expressed its firm support for the Aurora programme during its July meeting.

The RAS believes it is essential that the UK pledges 'significant' (£25-35 million p.a.) support at the ESA ministerial meeting next year - not only for the scientific and technological impact that such a programme would have, but also for its inspirational impact on current and future generations of scientists.

This is the full text of the statement issued by the RAS Council:

“The Society strongly supports UK participation in Aurora. The scientific case that has been drawn up for PPARC science and the growing support within the NERC, BBSRC and MRC communities

provides compelling evidence for a strong and leading involvement in Aurora science by UK researchers. The data to be obtained by the missions currently in the Aurora roadmap will undoubtedly provide science of the highest impact and importance, and it is recognised that the Aurora science themes coincide with many of the UK's strongest areas of expertise.

“The Society believes that the UK should take a leading role in the scientific and technological development of the programme; in order to do this the UK must sign up to Aurora at a significant level.

“Upon entering the programme, the Aurora funding agency in the UK must ensure that adequate resources are available to fund the operations and support aspects of UK involvement, and to ensure we are able to maximise the scientific exploitation of the results to come from the missions. It is recognised that significant participation in Aurora will dramatically increase funding in planetary science in the UK and it is important to ensure that there are enough qualified and trained staff to maximise our role.

“The Society believes that Aurora, as one of the programmes proposed for funding by the research councils, is of the highest possible priority, but it is a large scale programme and cannot be funded properly simply by altering priorities within existing science themes. Much of the funding for Aurora must come from new funding sources.

“The Society recognises that the UK has a tremendous hardware contribution to make to the programme and it would be difficult to take the UK role in Aurora seriously if we did not capitalise on the technological knowledge gained from the Beagle 2 experience. In order to compete with other agencies, we must be in a position to take the technological, as well as scientific, lead on major aspects of the programme. Given the historic record of the Mars landers, the

Aurora programme must include technology demonstration missions to prove its concept of descent and landing technology.

“The Society applauds the significant attempts made by PPARC to disseminate information through a UK Aurora web site and through support of, and attendance at, community meetings. The Society encourages further work to provide the general scientific community with coordinated information on the Aurora programme and its current rapid evolution. The scientific community would benefit from more rapid dissemination of information via the PPARC-funded web site, including information for/from other research council remits.

This will help the community to make informed decisions and provide accurate and considered advice to their respective research councils when requested to do so. A dedicated staff member of one of the research councils should be identified as having scientific responsibility for Aurora and liaison with the wider cross-disciplinary community.

“It is recognised that Aurora provides an unprecedented opportunity to engage the public and younger generation in science. This opportunity should not be underestimated, and the Society believes that the UK should make the most of this exciting programme to inspire current and future generations of scientists and engineers.”

Further information:

ESA Aurora / PESEP Web site:

[www.esa.int/export/SPECIALS/Aurora/index.html](http://www.esa.int/export/SPECIALS/Aurora/index.html)

President's Commission on Moon, Mars and Beyond:

[www.moontomars.org/](http://www.moontomars.org/)

NASA's Vision for Space Exploration:

[www.nasa.gov/missions/solarsys ... em/explore\\_main.html](http://www.nasa.gov/missions/solarsys...em/explore_main.html)

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