

NASA Astronomical Observatory Passes Hurdle

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The world's largest airborne astronomical observatory has passed a technical and programmatic review that could potentially lead to the continuation of the mission.

NASA's Program Management Council concluded that there were no insurmountable technical or programmatic challenges to the continued development of the Stratospheric Observatory for Infrared Astronomy (SOFIA). The agency has developed a technically viable plan to proceed with the development of the SOFIA aircraft, subject to the identification of appropriate funding offsets.

Earlier this year, the decision had been made to discontinue funding in fiscal year 2007 as a result of technical, programmatic, and budget challenges affecting the program. The NASA Program Management Council is chaired by NASA Associate Administrator Rex Geveden and comprised of NASA headquarters and center senior management.

"We placed the program on hold last February because of programmatic and technical issues," said Geveden. "Since that time, we have thoroughly reviewed the program and now are confident that SOFIA can resolve those issues. However, it is not yet clear whether SOFIA represents the best investment of space science funding, and we will need to consider funding options and sources before we decide to continue the mission."

SOFIA has been under development since 1996 as an airborne

astronomical observatory consisting of a 2.5-meter aperture telescope permanently installed in a specially-modified Boeing 747 aircraft. The aircraft, fitted with an open-port telescope provided through a partnership with the German Aerospace Center, will provide routine access to space observations in several parts of the spectrum beyond what is visible to the eye.

Source: NASA

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