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American Astronomical Society Supports Congressional Call for Review of Hubble Servicing Mission Cancellation

In a statement released today, the American Astronomical Society, the largest professional scientific association for astronomers and astrophysicists, has endorsed the congressional call for a review of the decision to cancel future Hubble Space Telescope servicing missions.

The president of the American Astronomical Society, Dr. Catherine A. Pilachowski of Indiana University said: “Astronaut safety is always a prime consideration for any space mission, but the Hubble space telescope is the most productive telescope of all time and a clear source of national pride. We must carefully weigh all possible solutions to servicing the Hubble while implementing the recommendations of the Columbia Accident Investigation Board regarding shuttle safety.”

Dr. Sidney Wolff, the chair of the society’s Committee on Astronomy and Public Policy and former director of the National Optical Astronomy Observatory agreed, saying “As astronomers, we are not experts on safety, but we do know that Hubble plays an absolutely vital role in our field. The congressional call for a review of the decision to cancel future servicing missions will allow the public to understand the decision process and possibly provide a forum for creative alternatives to be discussed.”

The AAS statement, adopted today, is given below in its entirety.

American Astronomical Society Statement on the Cancellation of Future Hubble Space Telescope Servicing Missions

The Hubble Space Telescope (HST) has inspired a generation of Americans with its scientific achievements. Since its launch in 1990, HST has explored the Universe, ranging from our own solar system to the most distant galaxies.

In the eyes of the public as well as in the judgment of professional astronomers, both nationally and internationally, HST represents the finest of the countless contributions the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) is making to science.

While the American Astronomical Society places paramount importance on astronaut safety, the astronomy community deeply regrets the cancellation of future servicing missions at a time when HST continues to make fundamental discoveries at an undiminished rate.

Thus, the AAS supports the congressional call for an independent panel of outside experts to review the decision to limit prematurely the lifespan of the Hubble Space Telescope. Such a decision must consider all possible options for accomplishing the servicing mission and must also be widely understood. We hope that such a review panel can be convened in a timely manner and its work completed quickly.

We urge that any process to reconsider the decision to cancel Servicing Mission 4 include as one of the considerations the future scientific contributions afforded by HST. These are outlined in part by the HST-JWST Transition Panel Report.

We further note that sustained HST operations are essential to reap the full benefits of NASA's other Great Observatories in space, the Chandra X-ray Telescope, launched in 1999, and the Spitzer Infrared Telescope, launched just a few months ago. Only if HST operates at full capability through 2009 do we have the opportunity to take advantage of the scientific synergy of these three Great Observatories, examining astronomical sources across the electromagnetic spectrum in X-ray, visual, ultraviolet and infrared light.

The Hubble Space Telescope is an international treasure that has inspired the people of America and the world for nearly 15 years. Its impact, not only on science, but on the dreams and imagination of our young people, cannot be overstated.