

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

WASHINGTON, D.C. - - September 1, 2010

The National Space Society Calls for Reconsideration of the Funding Proposed for Exoplanet Research in the Astro2010 Decadal Report

The National Space Society (NSS) believes that exoplanet research is among the most exciting scientific efforts of our time, with tremendous potential to excite young and old alike about the space frontier. Who among us has not pondered the question whether there are other “blue marbles” out there like our own home planet? That is why NSS is highly disappointed by the lack of recommended funding for exoplanet research in the National Research Council’s (NRC) Astro2010 Decadal Survey for astronomy and astrophysics, which was published recently. The report provides a recommended prioritization of ground and space based research in astronomy and astrophysics for the next decade. While the Decadal justifiably recognizes the importance of exoplanet research as one of its top three scientific priorities, a close reading of the report reveals that this ranking is not appropriately reflected in its actual funding recommendations. As such, the Decadal seems to indicate a willingness to delay an ambitious exoplanet research agenda until the 2020s or even beyond. While NSS recognizes the significant amount of work that the NRC's Astro2010 Decadal report represents, and thanks the members of the committee for their efforts, the failure to fund dedicated exoplanet missions at this time leads to serious questions about the overall Decadal plan.

Indeed, of the billions of dollars planned by the Decadal, the report remarkably pledges zero dollars towards a truly dedicated space-based exoplanet mission. The top ranking of the Wide-Field Infrared Survey Telescope (WFIRST) mission, while of scientific value, was a surprise to many in the astrophysics community and has never been supported broadly by the exoplanet science community. For example, the exoplanet community’s ExoPlanet Task Force (Lunine et al 2008) recommended that WFIRST’s microlensing approach to exoplanet demographics be pursued only if it could be done “without impacting the launch schedule” of higher priority exoplanet missions. WFIRST is in fact the long-planned Joint Dark Energy Mission (JDEM) with an exoplanet theme tacked on, but the scientific reality is that the main thrust of that mission is dark energy research. The only potential remaining prospect for a space-based exoplanet mission is in the as yet undirected, small, Explorer class missions.

In addition, NSS believes that the rejection of the Space Interferometry Mission (SIM), towards which NASA has already invested hundreds of millions of dollars, must be revisited. SIM has been ranked as a priority for the astrophysics community since the early 1990’s, and the Decadal committee itself recognized the mission as being technically mature. To prioritize technically-immature missions such as the Laser Interferometer Space Antenna (LISA) while dismissing SIM and the major investment by taxpayers in that mission, appears to be a failing in the report which NSS maintains should be reconsidered by NASA science leadership over the coming years.

Finally, the lack of serious commitment to a Terrestrial Planet Finder (TPF) mission, or even a major research program leading to TPF, realistically pushes such a mission into the 2030s, which

NSS feels would be a failure of vision and leadership. NSS believes that finding and characterizing another Earth-like planet is truly the holy grail of astronomy and would represent the culmination of thousands of years of human curiosity about humanity's place in the Universe. Pushing this mission off by two decades is not acceptable to NSS membership. The recent exciting discoveries by the Kepler space observatory are but one indication of the truly wondrous discoveries that await us in space.

NSS recognizes and acknowledges that there is much that is good in the Astro2010 Decadal survey, but the major flaw regarding exoplanet research leads to questions about the overall framework and priorities of the report.

Media contact:

Gary Barnhard

Phone: (202) 429-1600

E-mail: nsshq@nss.org

About the National Space Society

The National Space Society (NSS) is an independent, grassroots, non-profit organization dedicated to the creation of a spacefaring civilization. Founded in 1974, NSS is widely acknowledged as the preeminent citizen's voice on space. NSS counts thousands of members and more than 50 chapters in the United States and around the world. The society also publishes *Ad Astra* magazine, an award-winning periodical chronicling the most important developments in space. For more information about NSS, visit www.nss.org.