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ESA's Council of Ministers decides the future of European spaceflight

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ESA Ministerial Conference

European science programme in space to grow by 2.5% per year

On 5-6 December 2005, the Council of Ministers of the European Space Agency (ESA) met at the German Foreign Office in Berlin. ESA's highest body hammered out a comprehensive programme up to 2010, designed to ensure that European spaceflight remains competitive on an international level. The key issues at stake included the continuation of the joint science programme, with an annual increase of 2.5 percent, the expansion of launcher systems to create a family of launchers and the future of the International Space Station (ISS).

The conference signalled the end of Germany's four-year presidency of ESA's Council of Ministers. The Federal Minister for Economics and Technology, Michael Glos, handed over the chair to the Dutch Minister of Economic Affairs and Deputy Prime Minister Laurens Jan Brinkhorst.

Mr Georg Wilhelm Adamowitsch, also from Germany, assisted Mr Glos in chairing the negotiations; Mr Adamowitsch is state secretary in the Federal Ministry of Economics and Technology. He stressed: "In achieving a successful conclusion to the negotiations in Berlin, the German government has underlined its commitment to invest 3 percent of GNP in research by 2010, helping keep us competitive on an international level."

Prof. Dr Sigmar Wittig, Chairman of the Executive Board of the German Aerospace Center (DLR) and President of the ESA Council, remarked on the outcome of the conference: "I am delighted that, despite the many different and wholly justified interests of the individual member states, we were able to come to a positive and sustainable compromise. This sets Europe on the best possible footing to remain a strong partner in international spaceflight and to build on its strengths. The outcome of this conference has served to confirm and reinforce the challenging set of research activities, programmes and projects which we set ourselves at DLR."

Important stimulus for research, technology and innovation

A key objective of the conference was continuation of high-level ESA programmes. In Berlin, the 17 member states of ESA plus Canada, as associate member, generated a significant stimulus for research, technology and innovation, enabling ESA to continue its important contribution to Europe's international competitiveness. Germany, together with France, remains Europe's biggest space nation, and will continue to provide around 25 percent of all contributions. Germany has earmarked a total of some €1.8 billion for European spaceflight projects over the next few years.

Science programme to grow by 2.5% per year

Starting in 2006, ESA's science programme is scheduled to grow by 2.5 percent annually. With this move, ESA ministers plan to ensure that space research stays at the forefront of European spaceflight. By 2010, the partners plan to invest €2080 million in ESA's science programme, with Germany contributing €460 million, or 21.85 percent. Upcoming highlights in space research include the space telescope Herschel (due to launch in 2007), the GAIA mission to survey the Milky Way in three dimensions (scheduled to launch in 2011) and the BepiColombo probe's journey to Mercury, the closest planet to the Sun (launching in 2013).

Germany remains at the forefront of scientific Earth observation

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One topic of particular importance to both Germany and Europe as a whole is Earth observation. At the conference, ESA's Council of Ministers resolved upon the first phase (2006-2008) of the ESA/EU joint initiative on environmental and security policy, known as GMES (Global Monitoring for Environment and Security). Germany will play the leading role in this programme, with a contribution of 31 percent or €62 million. This will put Germany in an optimum position with regard to land observation, disaster prediction and security. Germany also retains its leading position in scientific Earth observation, where important findings have been made in meteorology and our understanding of climate change. The German government is also committed to promoting the country's industrial capabilities; by 2009, the EU anticipates that the world market for the construction and launching of satellites, the sale of data, ground stations and downstream service will be worth at least €29 billion.

Germany leads the way for small communication satellites

The Berlin conference also assigned Germany a leading role in the ARTES-11 programme, a series of new, small communication satellites having a maximum payload of 300 kg and electrical power of 3 KW. Germany's contribution to this programme amounts to 32 percent, or €32 million. This market is now being served by China and India as well as the USA, presenting Europe with a unique challenge. The technical concept of these new European communication satellites comes from the Bremen, Germany-based company OHB System AG and is based on the LUX project, which receives national support from DLR. As part of this project, a satellite platform is being developed for small geostationary satellites to establish a new method of system management.

Three rockets give Europe access to space - the European launcher family Ariane 5, Soyuz and Vega

In future, three launchers will provide Europe with access to space. This access is of enormous strategic importance: it allows Europe to exploit space without hindrance independently of other space nations in crucial areas such as Earth observation, metrology, intelligence, communications and navigation. Only through independent access to space will Europe be in a position to play a leading role in these technologies of the future. To achieve this objective, Germany is making a 15-percent financial contribution to the Ariane 5 programme and is also backing the launch of the Soyuz rockets from Kourou (French Guiana) and the new, small European launcher Vega, designed to take payloads of up to 1300 kg, starting in 2008. The backup for this launcher will be the German/Russian joint venture Eurockot.

International Space Station ISS

Germany was able to convince the other nations present in Berlin to continue with efforts to further expand the space station to accommodate up to six astronauts. ESA anticipates that the European space laboratory Columbus will be launched in 2008. Germany's contribution to the ESA programme amounts to 41 percent of the construction costs and some 38 percent of the European operating costs of the ISS.

Prof. Dr Wittig, the Chairman of DLR's Executive Board, concluded by saying: "The ESA ministers' conference in Berlin has resulted in the establishment of a sound basis on which to continue making

Europe an internationally recognised, strong and valued partner in space exploration. Germany, in particular, will be looking to build upon our existing strengths."

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