NASA REFORMS

Goldin Hopes to Trim Centers To Stave Off Program Cuts

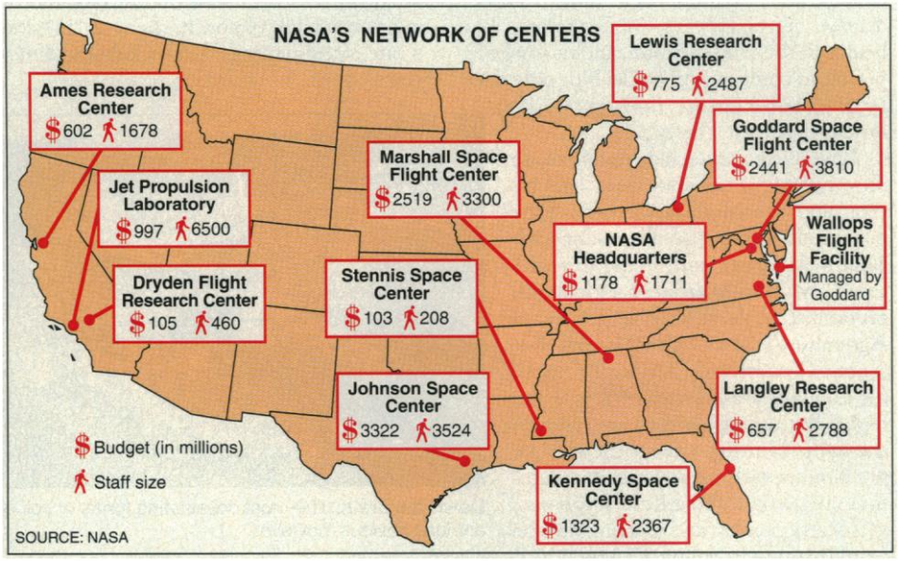
Daniel Goldin is girding for the biggest battle of his 3-year stint as chief of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA)—a campaign to streamline NASA's 12 centers in order to protect scientific programs from declining budgets. To succeed, Goldin must overcome the formidable political muscle of the centers, which employ more than 20,000 people in nine states.

A pending report by an outside task force on how NASA runs its network of centers will provide him with some ammunition: A draft obtained by *Science* suggests eliminating smaller facilities, consolidating work, and revamping the way the centers are run. But NASA's Advisory Council has criticized the draft, prepared by a panel led by former TRW executive John Foster, for failing to identify significant savings.

The council is responsible for presenting a final version to Goldin by 28 February. He will then forward it to the White House for inclusion in a wider review of national laboratories. The 25-member task force was working last week to ease the council's concerns by including more detailed recommendations to reduce duplication among the centers, agency officials say. "The council expected there would be more fingering of specific things to be canceled," says Bradford Parkinson, a Stanford University engineer and chair of the council. Indeed, Goldin has prepared a confidential policy paper that describes more drastic cuts to the centers than contained in the Foster report.

The 125-page draft report seen by the council does make some specific suggestions, however, on how to improve NASA operations. It says NASA should consider shutting down what it terms "secondary sites"—such as the Goddard Institute of Space Studies in New York City, the Wallops Flight Facility in Virginia, and a shuttle facility in Palmdale, California—and consolidating some activities. Two centers currently test liquid rockets, it points out, while three centers conduct aeronautics model design and testing and five centers have high-performance computing facilities. "You have got to close buildings and sell off property," says Anthony Iorillo, a member of the task force and chair of American Mobile Satellite Corp. It also calls for the centers to refine their missions.

The task force also recommends that the agency assign greater responsibilities to the Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL) in California and Goddard Space Flight Center in Maryland. JPL should take the lead in space science, the report suggests, while Goddard should focus on the Mission to Planet Earth, a set of programs designed to gather data on global climate change. The centers, rather than headquarters staff, should manage specific programs, according to the report, a move that would help Goldin achieve his goal of a 40% cut in the work force at headquarters.



Centers of attention. New report suggests bigger roles in space research for JPL and Goddard as part of an attempt to eliminate redundancy.

The draft report suggests that NASA adapt the model used to run JPL—the only major center operated by a contractor, the California Institute of Technology—for its other centers, which are staffed by civil servants. The current civil-service system, it says, is "inefficient and lacking in flexibility."

Some members of the Foster panel bristle at the criticism from the Advisory Council that they were too timid in their recommendations. "There is a mismatch between their expectations and what we were doing," says Iorillo. Naming specific programs to cut or consolidate was beyond the scope of the panel, he adds. "You don't get weekend warriors to do this—and that's what we are."

Parkinson concedes that Foster's work was in part overtaken by events—such as the recent White House decision to trim NASA's annual budget by more than $1 billion, to $13.3 billion, by 2000. But center directors question how much can be done without cutting into programs.

"We tend to overengineer things, and we're certainly going to downsize," says Goddard Director John Klineberg. But Klineberg says that turning Goddard over to an independent contractor such as Johns Hopkins University would offer few savings. Parkinson notes that Stanford has rejected suggestions in the past that it run the nearby Ames Research Center, largely because of the costs and hassles involved. An academic consortium or industry contractor might be a more realistic option, says planetary scientist Bruce Murray, a council member and former director of JPL.

Goldin, however, will be looking for more than a reshuffling of lab management. He says he has no choice but to contemplate radical cuts. With the $2.1 billion space station budget off limits and with Congress reluctant to jeopardize safety by sanctioning further cuts in the shuttle, streamlining the centers is the only way Goldin can avoid gutting the aeronautics research, space science, and Earth observation programs. "This is going to be very, very difficult," said Goldin.

But tampering with the centers is political dynamite, agree Administration and congressional officials. Programs come and go, but lawmakers will fight any attempt to close or shrink the number of workers at a center in their state or district. "They will wimp out," predicts Lori Garver, executive director of the National Space Society and a member of the Advisory Council, about congressional reaction to any proposed downsizing. "They just will not allow it."

The impending battle over the agency's sprawling network of centers will be a critical test of Goldin's political prowess. Is this the toughest fight he has faced at NASA? "You got it," he says.

–Andrew Lawler