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NASA

Subject to revision. Design for international space lab may change.

Space Station: Storm Brewing in '96

The international space station, which enjoyed balmy skies last year, seems headed for thunder clouds in 1996. U.S. Vice President Al Gore and Russian Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin will meet in Washington in late January to try to resolve a complicated dispute over what the orbiting laboratory should look like. That disagreement could upset the project's political prospects in Congress, say congressional staffers and National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) officials.

The trouble began last month, when a team of Russian space officials visiting Johnson Space Center in Houston proposed making the aging Mir space station the core of the new international facility. First launched in 1986, Mir has lasted far longer than anticipated. After last year's successful dockings between Mir and the space shuttle, Russian politicians are now loath to throw away the facility—yet they cannot afford to operate Mir and build their portion of the new laboratory. Making Mir part of the international station would solve their problem.

But this solution creates a headache for NASA Administrator Daniel Goldin, who has sold the current station plan to Congress by insisting it's a solid and final design. "The U.S. side went berserk" when it learned of the Russian proposal, one source close to the negotiations says. NASA officials worry that Mir is unsafe and that the Russians are trying to wiggle out of their commitment to provide new hardware for the station. They also know that a new dispute could heighten concerns of lawmakers already skeptical of Russian participation.

NASA and Russian engineers now are hard at work on a series of options, including a compromise that would incorporate at least two of Mir's modules into the new station design, according to NASA officials. They hope to finish by mid-January, in time for the political heavyweights to make a decision.

O'Leary Under Fire

Despite last year's attacks from House Republicans intent on dismantling it, the Department of Energy (DOE) remains intact. Now Republicans are targeting its chief, Hazel O'Leary. A 20 December letter from seven House chairs criticized O'Leary for extensive overseas travel and for using dubious statistics in justifying these trips as trade missions. Last week, O'Leary defended the trips, asserting that they have led to almost $20 billion in business for U.S. companies. "I stand by the numbers," she said in a written response.

DOE officials say the criticism, the latest in a series of political problems for O'Leary, is a witch hunt by Republicans eager to smear the department. "This is a concerted, orchestrated campaign," complains one. He adds that lawmakers like Rep. Dana Rohrabacher (R–CA), chair of the House Science energy and environment subcommittee, "have a plan" to force O'Leary's resignation.

But Rohrabacher legislative aide Rick Dykema claims that lawmakers are simply concerned about the use of taxpayers' money. He says Rohrabacher is concerned that O'Leary could be using research money for non-research-related travel, although another Hill staffer says DOE documents have not yet provided evidence of this. "We're just fulfilling our oversight role," he adds.

The White House's response to the criticism has been low-key. O'Leary's attention-grabbing and independent style, sources say, leave her with few allies among White House officials, who are preoccupied in any case with budget negotiations.

Changing Fortunes

What's getting hotter and what's cooling off in science as we head into 1996? *Science* offers this brief list—which, we caution, ranges from official news to the most speculative (and not so serious) of guesses:

OUT	IN
Top quark	Neutrinos
Rep. Robert Walker	Rep. James Sensenbrenner
Tenure	Temporary appointments
S-wave superconductivity	D-wave superconductivity
Office of Technology Assessment	Congressional Research Service
Technology programs	Basic research
Energy conservation	Star Wars (again)
John Maddox	Philip Campbell
CVs	Personal Web home pages
Endangered-species rights	Property-owner rights
Civil servants	Contractors
Human embryo research	Xenotransplantation
Dual-use technologies	Weapons research
Japan Inc.	China
Indirect costs	Flat rates
Environmental regulation	Risk assessment
Robert Gallo	Robert Gallo
Australopithecus afarensis	*Ardipithecus ramidus*
Ozone depletion	Greenhouse warming
Magnetic fusion	Inertial fusion
Extinction by asteroids	Extinction by volcanoes

Genome Sequencing Project in Limbo

DNA sequencers—itching to get started on a large-scale effort to decipher the human genome—are getting worried that the government's budget stalemate (see p. 22) could derail their plans.

This is a "make or break time" for the genome program, says Craig Venter, director of The Institute for Genomic Research, a private research outfit in Gaithersburg, Maryland. DNA sequencers in Britain have already received a hefty 7-year pledge of support from the private Wellcome Trust (Science, 1 November, p. 903). Meanwhile, U.S. researchers are concerned that their sequencing effort may get sidelined if a proposal by the National Center for Human Genome Research (NCHGR) to spend up to $20 million a year on rapid sequencing projects and automated technology doesn't get funded this year. "What's done by [U.S.] funding agencies in the next 6 months will have long-term consequences," says genomics researcher Philip Green of the University of Washington.

Researchers competing for the funds say about half of the 20 teams that submitted proposals last summer are already out of the running, while four or five groups claim to have received favorable reviews in December. NCHGR was to make final selections by early February and to distribute awards in April, and staffers declined to comment on the status of the review. But now researchers are starting to wonder when or if the overall Human Genome Program will be able to afford the initiative at all. NCHGR officials won't know the answer until Congress approves the center's 1996 budget, tucked into a bill to fund the entire Department of Health and Human Services and several other agencies.