

Acura Advisory Committee for the SKA report 2020-2021 (April 2021)

Members: Don Brooks (ACURA), Séverin Gaudet (NRC), Julie Hlavacek-Larrondo (Montréal), Doug Johnstone (NRC), Erik Rosolowsky (Alberta), Gregory Sivakoff (Alberta), Kristine Spekkens (Queen's), Dave Stevens (MDA), Ingrid Stairs (UBC), Rob Thompson (Calgary), and Gilles Joncas (chair, Laval). Observers: Sara Ellison (CASCA), Stefi Baum (GAC chair), Michael Rupen (NRC), Luc Simard (NRC)

The AACS met once (Feb.24) since the last report to the CASCA Board (December2020).

The SKA reached a major milestone on Feb. 5th when its intergovernmental organization (the SKA Observatory) came into full force – all three hosting countries (Australia, South Africa and the UK) having ratified the treaty - enabling the meeting of its first Council. A “new” entity, the SKA Observatory, will build and operate the SKA1. Two Council meetings have taken place so far with, as full members, the hosting countries in addition to Italy, The Netherlands, and Portugal. Canada is still an observer. France, Germany, Spain and Switzerland are negotiating to become full members. The third Council meeting is in June when Canada will be expected to inform as to where it stands.

The AACS meeting started with updates provided by Simard/Rupen from NRC on the international and national fronts, Spekkens as Scientific Director for Canada, and Gaudet on the SKA Regional Centers. Roughly, the last half of the meeting was spent on informing the Committee as to the lobbying actions so far by Spekkens and Joncas with the Coalition and on the University front. Further discussions on how to develop the best strategy for approaching and convincing the Canadian Government that our country should become a full member in the SKA project also took place. The discussions brought the following actions:

- The posting and use of a four-page document in both official languages promoting and informing on the SKA for government officials and university administrators. The document is designed so it can be improved with time as the project evolves.
- The construction of a functional and updated web site (skatelescope.ca) where the latest version of the four-pager can be found as well as many relevant documents on the SKA along with, of course, further links.
- Strategy discussions with the Coalition for Astronomy resulting in meetings with ISEAD, Ministry of Finance officials and staff within the Canadian Chief Science Advisor's Office.
- Weekly meetings with NRC-HAA.
- Receiving letters of support from all U15 universities hosting astronomy research groups but one. All were sent to the relevant Government officials.
- A white paper was written and sent to NDRIO the Canadian SKA Science Regional Center.

The Federal budget for 2021-2022 was presented to Canadians April 19. The SKA project did not appear per se in the written document. Probes are currently being sent to Government.

From what we know so far, if Canada does not commit to the SKA Construction Funding Schedule soon, major contracts (likely the correlator) will be lost and Canada will not receive full economic benefits. We can be late to the table with funding as happened with the TMT but, contrary to that precedent, there will be consequences both in governance and procurement. When we know more, new strategies will be developed.

Finally, a virtual international SKA Science Conference called “A Precursor View of the SKA Sky” was held 15-19 March. More than 900 people registered and over 400 abstracts were submitted. A list of participants did not appear on the web site, so Canadian involvement is unknown at this time. Anecdotally, however, a number of Canadian researchers participated.

Gilles Joncas
Chair
AACCS