

Acura Advisory Committee for the SKA report 2021 (December)

Members: Don Brooks (ACURA), Bryan Gaensler (Toronto), Séverin Gaudet (NRC), Julie Hlavacek-Larrondo (Montréal), Doug Johnstone (NRC), Gregory Sivakoff (Alberta), Kristine Spekkens (Queen's), Dave Stevens (MDA), Ingrid Stairs (UBC), and Gilles Joncas (chair, Laval). Observers: Will Percival (GAC), Michael Rupen (NRC), Luc Simard (NRC), Rob Thacker (CASCA), Kim Venn (ACURA), and Chris Wilson (LCRIC)

The AACS met twice (June 11th and December 1st) since the last report to the CASCA Board (April 2021).

I will start this report with an excerpt from an e-mail sent by the Director General of HAARC, Luc Simard a few weeks after the Federal budget was brought in: “Budget 2021 did not provide a decision on a future participation in the construction and operation phases of the SKA, and this comes at a time when the project is hoping to initiate construction soon (July). Thankfully, our government continues to recognize the importance and value of the SKAO, and consideration is still being given to the options available for Canada to continue making contributions to the project. We have formal Observer status on the recently established SKAO Council (February!), and we asked Council at their last meeting in late April to give us some time to do this. People here fully understand the SKA project timeline and the importance of Canada’s contribution to its success. I should add that Canada is not the only country seeking a path forward at this time.”

The Director General’s assessment was right. In time, NRC President Iain Stewart confirmed that a two-year Cooperation Agreement would be signed by Canada with the SKA Observatory. But then came the announcement of elections! The hiatus ended with the announcement by NRC on November 29th of the official signature of the Cooperation Agreement. Hence, Canada joined Switzerland and Sweden in a sort of waiting room during which time these countries could identify the money needed for their full participation and go through the bureaucracy of a treaty signature. Canada still has an Observer’s seat on the SKAO Council but one that now allows Canadian scientists and industry to make contributions to the project (the agreement ends March 2023) while a decision regarding full participation is made by our government. The time frame remains short since a funding envelope for the SKA must be identified in 2022 so that the following months are used to prepare for the treaty signature. A first for an international astronomical infrastructure where Canada is a participant.

Over the coming months, the AACS will have to work in concert with the Coalition for Canadian Astronomy towards Canada’s full participation through continuing lobbying efforts.

Meanwhile work continues for defining the architecture of the SKA Science Regional centers with our partners. This work has been divided amongst seven working groups in which Canada has participants. Séverin Gaudet (HAARC, NRC) is leading the Canadian initiative and contributes to the writing of a white paper for the SKAO Council. NRC has mandated the Doyletech Corporation for a commercial assessment of the SKA Regional Data Centre technologies. The conclusions of the report are very positive and a copy of the report may be asked to the signatory.

Gilles Joncas
Chair
AACS