

EDUCATION, SCIENCE AND TRAINING

SENATE LEGISLATION COMMITTEE – QUESTIONS ON NOTICE 2004-2005 BUDGET ESTIMATES HEARING

Outcome: CSIRO
Output Group: - CSIRO

DEST Question No. E240_05

Senator Carr provided in writing on.

Question:

I refer to the answer provided to E765, and have a number of questions on CSIRO performance.
Under performance indicator 2.4, why has CSIRO withdrawn from the LOFAR consortium? That happened rather suddenly after the adoption of the Strategic Plan, didn't it? Why was that?

Answer:

CSIRO has provided the following response.

Strategic Plan performance indicators

CSIRO was never a formal member of the Low Frequency Array radio telescope (LOFAR) consortium; which comprised institutions from the Netherlands (ASTRON) and USA (the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and the Naval Research Laboratory).

In collaboration with the Government of Western Australia, CSIRO responded to a request in March 2003 by the LOFAR site evaluation committee (SEC) to submit a proposal for LOFAR to be located at the Mileura site in WA. In July 2003, CSIRO initiated a broad scientific community consultation process on the LOFAR project – establishing the basis on which Australian scientists would wish to participate in the project. That process was concluded in December 2003, with the production of the LOFAR Options Paper in which the community indicated strong support for the LOFAR project on the basis that it would be sited in WA; the site with the best freedom from radio frequency interference in the scientifically important FM bands.

In early 2004, it became clear that the €52M awarded to ASTRON (the Dutch partner in LOFAR) from the Dutch Government, was tied to a Netherlands' location for the telescope. It therefore became clear that LOFAR as originally proposed could not be built in WA, and CSIRO therefore withdrew from LOFAR negotiations.

CSIRO and MIT are continuing negotiations on the development of a low frequency prototype next generation radioastronomy system at the Mileura site. This program seeks to demonstrate key technical and infrastructure issues for the Square Kilometre Array (SKA). This direction has been endorsed by the Australian SKA Consultative Committee and CSIRO-ATNF Steering Committee.

It is important to note that SKA and LOFAR are two separate programs. The LOFAR outcome has not impacted negatively on Australia's leadership role within the SKA (CSIRO Strategic objective 2.4). Rather, the campaign to base LOFAR in Australia (one of the initiatives under Strategic objective 2.4) has significantly enhanced the profile of the Mileura

site amongst the international SKA community. It has also resulted in enhanced ongoing collaboration between ASTRON, MIT and CSIRO in SKA-related issues.