PRESS RELEASE

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BRITISH SPACE SCIENTISTS DECLARE "NO CONFIDENCE" IN PHYSICS FUNDING AGENCY

At an emergency meeting of the UK scientific community that explores "space weather" and its effects on the Earth a vote of no confidence in the leadership and decision-making of the Science and Technology Facilities Council (STFC) was declared.

At a London meeting of solar-terrestrial physicists on Monday 21 January 2008, scientists who study the link between the Earth and our nearest star took the unprecedented step of issuing damning statements on the UK's current physics funding crisis.

In their resolutions, the UK space scientists announced that they were "deeply concerned about the lack of transparency in recent decision-making within the STFC… and the lack of consultation and discussion with the community". On the afternoon that the House of Commons Select Committee on Innovation, Universities and Skills heard evidence from Prof. Keith Mason (CEO of STFC) regarding the circumstances that led to the funding shortfall, the scientists passed a motion calling for "a change of the structures and individuals" at the heart of the research council.

"Solar-terrestrial physicists are making substantial contributions to debates on atmospheric and climate change, as well as hazards to communications and electrical/oil distribution networks" said Dr Andrew Kavanagh, a space scientist at Lancaster University. "STFC is essentially scrapping an entire field of research in the UK, one that is internationally recognised as world-leading, and we don't understand why. The recent downplaying of these cuts by the CEO just highlights our concerns over the way business is being done in STFC. "

Although many scientists welcome the recently formed Wakeham review into the health of UK Physics, STFC executives have made it clear that its findings will come too late to safeguard jobs and UK science capability. Although STFC cuts are impacting upon many branches of physics and astronomy, the solar-terrestrial physics community is one of the areas hardest-hit by the STFC delivery plan.

Dr Stan Cowley, Professor of Solar Planetary Physics at the University of Leicester said: "This decision appears perverse in view of the existing and future potential high-impact world class research in this area, which is recognised internationally. STP has an immediate connection to knowledge exchange and economic impact, which are completely in line with government plans for STFC".

"Many school kids start studying physics because of an interest in space science and astronomy; to cut funding in this area of UK physics is ludicrous, especially in an age when physics education is at an all-time low", said Dr. Adrian Grocott of the University of Leicester. "This sends a very bad signal to early career scientists who may have to take their skills and expertise abroad if they want to further their careers. Such drastic cuts are going to have a seriously detrimental effect on the UK's ability to educate the physicists of tomorrow."

Notes to editors:

MIST:

The UK's Magnetosphere, Ionosphere and Solar-Terrestrial (MIST) scientific community is engaged in fundamental and applied research into the interactions between the Sun and the Earth (Solar-Terrestrial Physics) and investigates the effects of the Sun on the Earth's protective magnetic shield (its magnetosphere) and Earth's atmosphere. Scientists in the UK play a key role in understanding and predicting space weather events. These can:

- Cause damage to Earth-orbiting satellites providing (amongst others) global communications and Earth observations for weather prediction.
- Interrupt radio communications.
- Effect electricity and oil supply networks.
- Pose critical health risks to astronauts in space, of key importance for future planned missions to Mars and the moon, and which also present increased risks to air crews and aerospace avionics.

The community also helps to understand the effect of solar variability on climate change, studies how GPS navigation signals pass through the atmosphere, track potentially dangerous space debris, and develops novel techniques for geological exploration. This research portfolio has a high international profile and makes significant contributions to major scientific issues (e.g. climate change) with a high priority for central government. The practical applications of this research have substantial economic and societal impacts for the UK.

MIST resolutions:

The MIST community gathered at the Royal Astronomical Society's London Headquarters on 21st January and passed three resolutions, the full text of which are available at

http://www.mist.ac.uk/mistres.html

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MIST is represented by the MIST council, which is a group of five UK researchers, elected by the space science community to plan conferences and organise the community. The current council comprises of Prof. Mike Hapgood (Rutherford Appleton Laboratory) (chair), Prof. Betty Lanchester (University of Southampton), Dr Gary Abel (British Antarctic Survey), Dr Andrew Kavanagh (University of Lancaster) and Dr Chris Arridge (University College London). Further details regarding the MIST community (including MIST Council members) can be found at: www.mist.ac.uk