

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE****An Open Letter to the Australian Federal Government from International Scientists**  
**Australia's contribution to Spaceguard**

A spokesperson for Science Minister, Peter McGauran, has recently stated that the Australian Government will investigate the renewal of funding for a dedicated Australian Spaceguard programme.

The international NEO research community welcomes this initiative, and wishes to encourage the Australian government to take a leading role in this new, exciting and relevant area of scientific research. An open letter, signed by over 90 leading researchers from around the world has been sent to key government officials in Australia encouraging support for an Australian Spaceguard programme. The text of the letter is attached to this release.

**Key Points:**

- ❑ Spaceguard is the name given to an international effort to detect asteroids and comets that might collide with the Earth. Such objects are referred to as Near Earth Objects (NEOs).
- ❑ The United States is the main contributor to the search effort, and Japan recently constructed a new Spaceguard facility. In Europe the British government's NEO Task Force report validated the hazard posed by asteroids and comets, and made a number of recommendations for British and international action. Discussions on possible European projects, led by the UK, are ongoing.
- ❑ The only professional asteroid tracking project in the southern hemisphere is funded mostly by the United States and is associated with the Australian National University. However, a much greater search effort, including a larger telescope, is required to detect asteroids in the southern sky.
- ❑ The AANEAS programme that searched for asteroids in the late 1980s and early 1990s found one third of new potentially hazardous asteroids discovered during that period. Australian government funding for the project ceased in 1996 and the project terminated leaving the southern sky unpatrolled.
- ❑ The United Nations and the OECD have recognised the potential hazard to our civilisation from asteroid impacts.
- ❑ A global Spaceguard programme could provide decades of warning of an impact, providing sufficient time to refine the technology required to divert the threatening asteroid into a harmless orbit, or to evacuate the predicted impact area. This is clearly demonstrated by the recent close approach of 2001 YB5, a 300m wide asteroid.

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The letters were sent by airmail from Spaceguard UK on 28 Jan to:

- The Hon John Howard, MP, Prime Minister of Australia
- The Hon Peter McGauran, MP, Minister for Science
- The Hon Dr Brendan Nelson, MP, Minister for Education, Science and Training
- Senator the Hon Robert Hill, Minister for Defence
- The Hon Dr David Kemp, MP, Minister for the Environment and Heritage

They were followed up with email (where available) and faxes on 1 Feb.

## THE INTERNATIONAL SPACEGUARD INFORMATION CENTRE



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### **An Open Letter to the Australian Federal Government from International Scientists** **Australia's contribution to Spaceguard**

Spaceguard is the name given to an international effort to search the skies for asteroids that might collide with the Earth. The name was coined by Sir Arthur C Clarke in a 1973 novel that described how mankind set up an asteroid detection and defence network after a large asteroid struck Italy and devastated southern Europe. Since the novel was written the risks and grave consequences of asteroid impacts have been recognised and studied. Scientists around the globe are now working to ensure that Clarke's scenario of a sudden, deadly impact does not occur.

The United States is the main contributor to the search effort, with several telescopes dedicated to Spaceguard. Japan recently constructed a new telescope facility for Spaceguard work and Europe is in the process of setting up search telescopes and the vital support systems to analyse the data from the searches.

Rob McNaught from Siding Spring in New South Wales runs the only professional asteroid tracking project in the southern hemisphere. This operation is funded mostly by the United States and is associated with the Australian National University. It was set up in recognition of the need for Spaceguard telescopes in the southern hemisphere. Gordon Garradd, an astronomer from Loomberah in New South Wales, receives some funds from NASA for critical southern hemisphere follow-up observations using a home-made telescope.

However, a much greater search effort, including a larger telescope, is needed to detect asteroids that pass through southern skies. It would cost several million dollars to set up a suitable facility in Australia but some of this might be covered by contributions of equipment from the USA. Operational costs should be less than \$1 million per year. This is a highly cost effective investment in the prevention of loss of life and severe economic damage from asteroid impacts.

McNaught and Garradd were previously in a team of Australian astronomers, led by Dr Duncan Steel, who searched for asteroids between the late 1980s and 1996. They found about one third of new threatening asteroids discovered during this period, demonstrating Australian expertise and the importance of searching southern skies. Australian government funding for the project was withdrawn in 1996 and the team disbanded.

The United Nations and the OECD have recognised the potential hazard to our civilisation from asteroid impacts. This month the OECD is looking at the issue as part of its Global Science Forum and recently asked developed nations to indicate their plans to contribute to the Spaceguard effort.

A major global Spaceguard effort could provide decades of warning prior to an impact. This would be sufficient time to refine the space technology needed to nudge a threatening asteroid into a harmless orbit, or to evacuate the predicted impact area. Without Spaceguard there would be too little warning to prevent a disaster. This is clearly demonstrated by the recent close approach of a 300m wide asteroid. It was discovered only a few days before it passed by the Earth and, had it been on a

collision course, there is little that could have been done to prevent possibly millions of casualties when an area the size of Tasmania would have been devastated.

We note that a spokesperson for Science Minister Peter McGauran said that the Government would look into renewing the funding of a dedicated Australian Spaceguard programme (The Age, 9th January). We welcome this reassessment of the issue and look forward to Australia rejoining the international effort to deal with the asteroid threat.

Signatories:

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**Additions (after the letter was sent)**

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