

at DOE. The new position, created as part of the Energy Policy Act of 2005, elevates Orbach to the same level as the other DOE undersecretaries and is expected to give science more visibility in the vast government agency (see PHYSICS TODAY, February 2006, page 23).

Orbach, who will continue as head of the Office of Science, told a Senate committee following his nomination by President Bush in March, "Creation of this position highlights the important role of science and scientific research at [DOE], and indeed in the American economy as a whole." Orbach, a theoretical physicist, told the senators that DOE will need to fund and perform "science that is world-class, science that is at the far frontier of human knowledge."

The science community has been pushing for the establishment of the undersecretary position since 2000, and former Office of Science director Mildred Dresselhaus said the high status that comes with the title will make it easier for Orbach to get things done within DOE. JLD

Deep space network fragile. NASA's deep space communications network is suffering from old age, years of deferred maintenance, and an ineffective management structure, all of which threaten its ability to handle the potential demands of President Bush's plan to send humans back to the Moon and to Mars. That is the conclusion of a May Government Accountability Office report that NASA officials largely agree with.

In addition to noting an "increasingly fragile" infrastructure that is "subject to breakdown at a time when demand is anticipated to increase," the report said the competing demands for communications time for old missions, such as the *Voyager* spacecraft launched in 1977, and new missions are straining the system. "Capacity limits constrain the amount of science data that can be returned from deep space by new missions that are added to [the network's] set of users," the report says.

The report recommends that NASA reorganize the network management to better integrate the communications system with agency-wide planning instead of the current mission-by-mission time allocation process.

The network consists of three sites—Goldstone, California; Madrid, Spain; and Canberra, Australia—each with a 70-meter antenna and several smaller antennas. The network is designed to communicate with spacecraft more than 1.2 million miles from Earth and supports 35 to 40 missions each year. JLD

UK research funding agencies. On 22 May, two UK funding agencies released a joint statement in support of their merging, a move suggested by the Treasury earlier this year. The government is expected to decide this summer whether to go ahead with the proposed merger of the Particle Physics and Astronomy Research Council (PPARC) and the Council for the Central Laboratory of the Research Councils (CCLRC), and to decide on the purview of the new agency.

The motivations for the proposed merger, according to government spokespeople, include positioning the UK to play a stronger role in the next generation of European and global projects and gaining clout with the business community, which could benefit technology transfer. Financial savings is not one of the motivations. Merging would aid in long-term strategic planning over a wide spectrum of scientific fields, says PPARC head Keith Mason. "If you have it all under one roof, it's easier to make decisions across the patch and to take advantage of synergies."

Although UK scientists widely support the merger, they want the individual grants currently under PPARC's auspices to stay in the new agency—for now called the Large Facilities Research Council—and not, as the government has suggested, moved to the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council. Also on the table is whether the new agency would incorporate nuclear physics and nuclear fusion, which are currently funded by EPSRC.

PPARC's annual budget is roughly £300 million (\$550 million), CCLRC's is £157 million, and nuclear physics and fusion grants currently at EPSRC total in the tens of million pounds.

The last major reorganization of UK research funding agencies was in 1993. TF

Historic observatory sale. As part of a land sale to private developers that still requires the nod of the local community, Yerkes Observatory would become an education and outreach center owned by the Village of Williams Bay, Wisconsin (see PHYSICS TODAY, November 2005, page 26). The University of Chicago announced the sale of its 109-year-old observatory on 7 June, with Don Randel, the university's president, saying that the plan "meets all three of our goals for Yerkes. It provides a secure funding stream to preserve [the observatory] as an outreach facility; it provides resources for future research in astronomy, and it proposes a high-quality and environmentally sensitive development."

The Mirbeau Company of Skaneateles, New York, is buying the property and will transfer the observatory and 30 acres to Williams Bay. On the remaining 48 acres, Mirbeau plans to build a retreat and about six dozen private homes. The sale proceeds of more than \$8 million will be used by Chicago's astronomy department. In addition, Mirbeau will contribute \$400 000 annually to support education and outreach at Yerkes, which will be run by a not-for-profit organization. TF ■

web watch

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<http://iwaswondering.org>

Last year, the National Academies Press published the 10-book series *Women's Adventures in Science*. Aimed at middle-schoolers, the books seek to attract girls to science through the life and work of current women scientists. Now, much of the same material—and more—is available through **iWASwondering**, an interactive, multimedia website.



http://csee.lbl.gov/asteroid_impact

From the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory comes **Frank Asaro Asteroid Impacts: The Inside Story**, a detailed online account of chemist Frank Asaro's contributions to confirming one of the 20th century's most remarkable hypotheses—that a giant meteorite struck Earth and wiped out the dinosaurs.

<http://qwiki.caltech.edu>

A wiki is an online encyclopedia whose volunteer contributors cooperate to enhance and expand its entries. Barely a year old, **Qwiki** is devoted to all aspects of quantum science. Its curators, who work in Hideo Mabuchi's lab at Caltech, hope their burgeoning resource will prove useful to practicing scientists, "the people," as they put it, "who post content to the arXiv and quant-ph."