



By Gerry Oberst

European Space Policy May Take Off In 2007

In mid-2005, European politicians declared that “European space policy will take off before the end of 2005.”

It did not quite happen that way, as European voters rejected the European constitution that, among other matters, would have given space policy authority to the European Commission. The constitution would have established space as an area of “shared competence” between the European Union as a whole and its member states. It also would have explicitly called for a European space policy to promote joint initiatives.

Progress on adopting an explicit policy seemed to have sputtered, but now it looks that new and perhaps more successful efforts will be made in 2007.

It now seems certain that the European Space Policy (ESP) will be on the table for the first half of 2007. As part of its own consultation on U.K. Civil Space Strategy in January, the British National Space Centre predicted that the ESP will be endorsed at a space council meeting in May. The European Space Agency’s (ESA) Web site confirms that the ESP will be the highlight of the May 22 meeting of the space council, a joint high-level meeting between the European Union (EU) and ESA.

The EU and ESA established a framework agreement in May 2004 as a basis for developing the ESP and schedule regular meetings at the ministerial level within a space council for coordinating activities. The upcoming May meeting would be the fourth such gathering. Another element of the original 2004 EU and ESA agreement was to form a High Level Space Policy Group, which meets more often than the council to ensure coordination between the two.

With the council and the policy group, in essence, much of the coordination and the highest profile projects that would be pursued under an ESP already are under way. For example, the primary space policies at the European level – Galileo and the Global Monitoring for Environment and Security (GMES) – are moving forward in the absence of an ESP.

Galileo is the European satellite location system, which one day may rival GPS, while GMES involves a substantial commitment of satellite Earth observation resources. Both

programs have faced recent financial questions, but these issues would not necessarily be affected one way or the other by a functioning ESP.

A third priority for space is long-term research into satellite communications technologies in the context of the European information society initiatives.

These space priorities are scheduled to receive more than 1.4 billion euros (\$1.8 billion) of funding from the EU research and development budget between 2007 and 2013.

In its January consultation, the British National Space Centre described the ESP in terms that appear little changed from the descriptions that appeared two years earlier. The current elements of ESP are said to comprise a strategy for objectives, lists of priorities and projects, commitments by the main contributors to their roles and responsibilities, and key principles for implementation. These terms appear about the same as the white paper on ESP that the European Commission released in May 2005.

At that time, the Commission said that space is increasingly a “key element for key EU policies.” The paper argued that an ESP would integrate space activities closer to other EU policies, including transport and environment. This role is one that neither ESA nor the individual EU member states can carry out on an integrated basis.

There are many actors in space activities in Europe, the Commission acknowledged, but it maintains that Europe needs to “optimize its governance scenario for space.” In part, this is perhaps a veiled reference to rationalizing the different memberships of the EU and ESA but also could include defining how the Commission will see its own role in setting space policy under a new ESP. The Commission recognizes that this role will be, in the words of one official, a “difficult and delicate policy task,” because some member states already are heavily involved in space activities.

These governance issues remain to be settled, though progress may be made at the May European space council.

Expect to see a new Commission paper updating its 2005 white paper on ESP. If the paper is to be the basis for results in May, it likely will surface soon as a restatement of the goals and priorities for an ESP.

Perhaps the headline for the press release in mid-2007 can echo earlier statements and announce that European space policy will take off before the end of 2007. ▣

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