

Draft Findings -- Meeting of June 20, 1997

1. Flight Rates and Competition for Resources

The SRWG is alarmed by the prospects of reduced flight rates under the new NASROC arrangement. The switch to a contractor with no compensation to replace the loss of civil servant support will undoubtedly result in lower flight rate.

Although we are painfully aware that finances are scarce and that all areas of NASA are asked to tighten belts, we believe that a healthy sounding rocket program is vital to the nation's space research program, as determined by numerous blue ribbon review panels, particularly in the past five years. In our view, a new "target" average rate of 20 flights/year would undermine the advantages that the program accrues from "economies of scale" and would starve the technology development opportunities that rockets provide, particularly for orbital and space station missions.

Along these lines, competing rockets with the Explorer program for scarce research funds appears to us to be a questionable policy. Although on the surface it might appear to be "fair", we should not get in a situation where we are putting the rocket infrastructure on the line every year. This will undoubtedly have repercussions for baseline NASROC contracts as well as our agreements with various launch ranges. We urge NASA to develop a robust, healthy baseline of sounding rocket support that the community can both compete for, and can count on, when planning research programs.

2. Wallops 2000

We appreciate the presentation on Wallops 2000 by Ms. Judy Bruner. The Sounding Rocket Working Group is thrilled that Wallops has a future.

The SRWG feels strongly that a Research and Development (R and D) effort be maintained as a critical aspect of the future of Wallops and of the rocket program and is concerned that such a program has not been clearly delineated in the Wallops 2000 plan. We suggest that such a program be included as part of the civil servant managed R and D effort currently envisioned for the balloon program. There are, and will continue to be, improvements desired for the rocket program, particularly as new technology becomes available. Although the NASROC company can be tasked to study various new ideas, we see the need for a joint sub-orbital R and D unit, apart from the profit-motive, to develop key new areas where the "pay off" may not be immediate, but will be appreciated further downstream.

3. NASROC

The Sounding Rocket Working Group appreciates the difficult job that the NASROC committee has undertaken. We are pleased that they have been able to maintain several key features of the sounding rocket program as part of the new proposed arrangement.

From our perspective, the NASROC committee has averted a disaster while being responsive to the user community. To their efforts, we extend our sincere congratulations and thanks.

4. Poker Flat

We remain perplexed by the arrangement that NASA has with Poker Flat and are very uncertain how this will be maintained to NASA's advantage once the NASROC is in place. Given the number of unanswered questions at the last meeting, the SRWG requests a presentation at its next meeting on the current set-up, how the "every other year" arrangement is going, and what changes are necessary under the new contract. Will, for example, the NASROC enable flights to be carried out every year? Given that NASA HQ hands are tied when there are delays due to weather or other problems, such an arrangement would alleviate many problems and would be the "silver lining" for at least one part of the scientific community on the agency's decision to instigate the NASROC arrangement.

END of Draft Findings