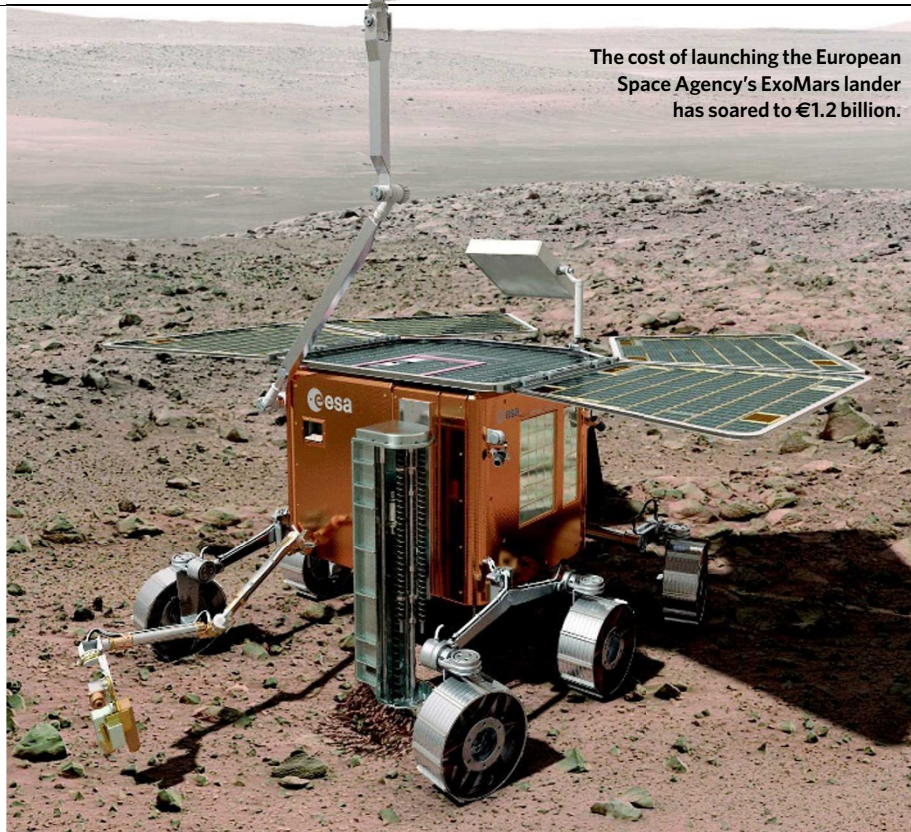




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The cost of launching the European Space Agency's ExoMars lander has soared to €1.2 billion.

No more third time lucky

The US National Institutes of Health (NIH) announced last week that biomedical researchers will be able to amend and resubmit a failed funding application only once. Applicants whose grants are unfunded after the second submission may reapply only after designing a new proposal.

The new guidelines, effective from 25 January 2009, are part of an NIH overhaul of the peer-review system for evaluating grant proposals. That system previously allowed applicants two chances to resubmit rejected proposals. Earlier this year, the agency mooted doing away with resubmissions, but decided against it after an outcry from researchers (see *Nature* 453, 835; 2008).

The NIH estimates that the move will reduce the number of applications by up to 5,000 — welcome news as it struggles to evaluate about 55,000 applications this year.

Grants are increasingly awarded only after they have been through several rounds of submission — in 2007, only about 30% of awards were granted to first-time submissions — and some think resubmission has directed funding towards less competitive proposals. “The study sections may feel ‘we’ve tortured this person long enough,’ and fund them out of sympathy,” says Keith Yamamoto, a molecular biologist at the University of California, San Francisco, who co-chaired a panel tasked with evaluating the NIH’s peer-review system.

Toni Scarpa, director of the NIH Center for Scientific Review, says the new policy will remove delays to funding the most worthy projects, and calls it “a moral imperative”.

But some researchers object to the change. Gregory Petsko, a biochemist at Brandeis University in Waltham, Massachusetts, says the system discriminates against young investigators who may need more guidance with their applications. Others view the resubmission process as a way for equally meritorious applications to wait their turn for funding in a time of tight NIH budgets.

The new guidelines could stifle worthy projects, says Beatrice Hahn, an HIV researcher at the University of Alabama, Birmingham. “What are we supposed to work on thereafter?” she says. “Although well intentioned, this change will cause major problems in the current funding crisis.”

Heidi Ledford with additional reporting by Erika Check Hayden

of NASA’s planetary science division.

NASA administrators and MSL personnel will meet again in early January to review the mission’s progress. If the MSL doesn’t look as if it will be ready to launch in 2009, it may be delayed until 2011.

The fate of other Mars missions, including

the MAVEN orbiter slated for a 2013 launch and a lander planned for 2016, remains up in the air. And the idea of scooping up a sample of Mars soil and returning it to Earth might be pushed back until as late as 2022.

Geoff Brumfiel and Ashley Yeager, with additional reporting by Eric Hand

no new recruitment, and the number of temporary research staff has consequently rocketed. There are at least 4,500 long-term temporary staff — known as *precari*, in reference to their precarious positions — who stumble from one short-term contract to another.

The scientists say that their protest is not directed against the conventional postdoc system, but against the unhealthy ratio of temporary to permanent staff. “We have pathological numbers because new long-term positions have been blocked,” says Luciano Maiani, president of the CNR, Italy’s national research council.

As a result of the protests, Brunetta says that researchers will be given until 1 July 2009 while he investigates their claims. But presidents of the various Italian research agencies believe that the only way out of the situation is for the agencies to have more autonomy from the civil service.

“The government should recognize the highly specific professionalism of the research personnel — it is not appropriate for them to fall under civil-service rules,” says Enzo Boschi, president of Italy’s National Institute of Geophysics and Volcanology.

Claudio Gatti is a particle physicist at the National Institute of Nuclear Physics in Frascati who stands to lose a promised permanent job under the proposed law. He says that “in the Italian research system there’s no planning, no mobility, no future — but we are ready to fight for our rights with every legal means available to us”.

Research and education minister Mariastella Gelmini has not commented publicly on the situation, and did not respond to requests from *Nature* for comments.

Emiliano Feresin and Alison Abbott
See Editorial, page 835.