

Space station heads for battle in Congress . . .

Washington. The US National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) is due to announce today (24 March) that the 'conceptual design' of the international space station is complete. It will then start praying that a status report to be delivered to Congress next week will be sufficient to secure continued US funding for the project.

A two-day review meeting being held at the Johnson Space Center, Houston, Texas, this week between NASA, its international partners and its contractors is an important landmark in the redesign of the space station. The latest — and, NASA promises, last — redesign began hurriedly last autumn when the Clinton administration decided to bring Russia into the programme.

"This is where we move from concepts to hardware implementation," says Randy Brinkley, NASA space station programme manager. "It is by far the most important milestone in the programme since last

year's redesign."

NASA says that three-quarters of the new international space station will be made up of hardware already planned for the original Freedom station. The project now moves into a detailed design phase, due for completion in April 1995.

Government officials from the international partners — the United States, Europe, Canada, Japan and Russia — met last week in Paris for the first time to discuss how existing agreements need to be modified to allow Russia into the programme. At the end of the meeting, they issued a vague communique, promising further negotiations starting in April, but giving no fixed date for their completion.

Each party has its own doubts and fears about the proposed collaboration. But its fate ultimately rests with the US Congress, whose House of Representatives agreed to continue it by only a single vote last sum-

mer, and will return to the issue over the next few months.

Once again, its prospects are finely balanced. The space station is likely to lose support from members of Congress who feel that the Russian deal may fall apart, or believe that it dilutes the station's value, either as a science project or as a 'pork barrel'. But it will gain others prepared to back it as a centrepiece of President Bill Clinton's policy towards Russia (*Nature* 365, 681; 1993).

George Brown (Democrat, California), chairman of the House Science, Space and Technology Committee, and until recently a key station supporter, is threatening to withdraw his backing, on the grounds that the programme will put too much strain on NASA's depleted resources.

But some observers in Washington see this as a ploy to extract concessions from the administration elsewhere. Ultimately, they expect Brown to return to the fold, while other Democrats who have previously shown little interest in the programme may rally to the cause if the success of the president's foreign policy is thought to be at stake. It is Republican supporters of the station who are most likely to defect.

In the end, two factors unrelated to the space station will probably determine its fate: the fiscal mood of Congress, and the state of US-Russian relations when the vote comes round in June. "Basically it's too early to call," says John Logsdon of the Space Policy Institute at George Washington University in Washington DC. "All we can say for certain is there's going to be a fight."

Colin MacIlwain

Russian scientists set up green policy group

Moscow. A potentially influential new voice in debates over the future of Russia's environment emerged on the political scene in Moscow last week when two dozen scientists and public interest group representatives announced the setting up of the Centre for Ecological Policy.

The board responsible for running the centre will be chaired by Alexei Yablokov, a corresponding member of the Russian Academy of Sciences who was previously President Boris Yeltsin's adviser on ecology and public health and is now counsellor to the Security Council of Russia.

The new centre will have two main goals. One is to influence government policy in the field of ecology by proposing novel solutions to urgent ecological problems, the second to supply the environmental movement with sound scientific information and advice.

Carl Levitin

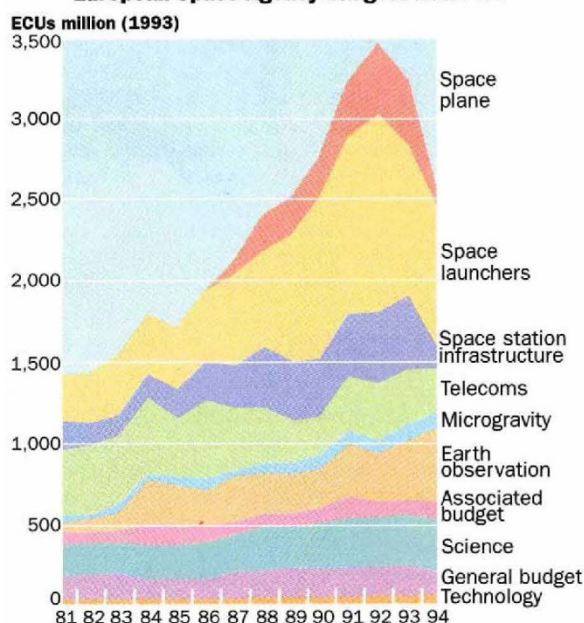
. . . as Europe cuts manned projects

Paris. Europe's decision on the terms of its participation in the international space station, which was to have been taken at a meeting of European Space Agency (ESA) ministers in February 1995, now seems likely to be postponed until after the French presidential election in May next year. It may even be delayed until after the German elections in October, as France and Germany are the largest contributors to ESA.

The 1994 budget of the ESA, which was agreed by the council in Paris last month, shows the full extent of the cut-backs in the manned space programme — including its commitment to the international space station — precipitated by continuing economic difficulties in its member states (see above).

ESA has abandoned the Hermès space plane, and plans to spend just ECU477.4 million (US\$529 million) over the next two years on studies of other programmes related to the space station (*Nature* 367, 305; 1994). These include the Columbus attached laboratory and an Apollo-like capsule to be carried on the launcher Ariane V. Moreover, no space station hardware will be built until ESA formally decides what

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type of contribution it is prepared to make to the station.

Science and Earth observation are the only two areas to receive more money in this year's budget. Other victims of the cuts include a flight of Europe's Spacelab module on the US shuttle, and a proposed mission of the Eureka unmanned retrievable instrument-carrying platform. The platform, which cost US\$400 million, flew in orbit only once, and will now be stored at a cost of \$8 million, as ESA cannot afford the ECU150 million needed to refurbish it for a second mission.

Declan Butler