Politics Link

SETI is a political lightning rod

Zeitlin 2000

Gerry, Masters in Astronomy, Associate Member of the Society for Scientific Exploration, and a past member of the Society for Planetary SETI Research, “Open SETI Cost” http://openseti.org/OSIntro.html

For years, NASA's SETI program was funded in that way -- out of discretionary slush funds. Perhaps it would have been better to keep SETI on that basis, because each time serious funding was granted by Congress, it initiated a disruptive process characterized by gearing up, national spotlight, backlash, and premature termination.

SETI was a kind of lightning rod for America's unhappiness about its social conditions. The programs themselves were always modest in their cost. Even the officially-funded ones were slated to spend only a few million dollars per year. Everyone knows you can't buy very much with that kind of money - either in social welfare, education, or infrastructure. Yet when presented with images of what these dollars would purchase in terms of large radiotelescopes searching the skies for extraterrestrial civilizations, people were easily persuaded that this was a luxury, given the broad spectrum of society's crucial needs. It is probably the high visibility and the exotic nature of SETI that make it such an attractive target for congressional demagogues wishing to score points by showing how they were cutting out useless government projects.

T-its cards

SETI is not a government program

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In the first place, SETI has not been a national program for most of its history, and is not one now, in that it is not being operated or supported by the US government. No doubt there are federal grants for some educational and outreach programs but this does not mean taxpayer money is spent to perform SETI searches.

Most SETI experiments have been conducted at university-operated radio observatories and supported by such piecemeal grants as could be found for them or by internal slush funds or excess dollars out of other budgets. In other words, they have been operated much as any scientific observing program would be, that did not enjoy a line-item federal budget allocation.

EU CP solvency

European SETI searches broader frequencies.

Boyd 6/16, Clark, Europeans Hope Their Low Frequency Array Will Complement US SETI

http://www.theworld.org/2011/06/europeans-hope-their-low-frequency-array-will-complement-us-seti

A scientific quest for life elsewhere in the universe is facing some down-to-earth problems. The SETI Institute in California, considered the world’s premiere organization when it comes to scanning the skies for signs of extraterrestrial life, recently mothballed a powerful radio telescope it had been using to search for signals from alien civilizations. The effort has been put on hold due to a lack of money.

But the Americans aren’t the only ones involved in SETI, which stands for the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence.\* Armed with a new kind of radio telescope, Europe’s Low Frequency Array, or LOFAR, hopes to complement the SETI work that was being done in the United States.

SETI’s suffered a severe financial blow, says Alan Penny, a British astronomer working with LOFAR.

Penny, who has spent much of his career searching for signs of life in the universe and who spent a year at the SETI Institute maintains that the field has not suffered, though, in terms of the science or the reason for doing the work. And it’s certainly not suffered a severe blow in terms of the enthusiasm of the people, like me, who want to do it. It’s all part of the struggle, says Penny.

LOFAR, which officially came online last year, is designed to study the early history of the universe. Whereas other radio telescopes look like giant satellite dishes, LOFAR consists of fields of antennas spread out over five European countries. And while many modern telescopes look for signals at higher frequencies, LOFAR aims at the lower, and noisier bands.