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RAINFALL MONITORING

Report Bucks NASA's Plan to End Mission

The forecast for an aging NASA spacecraft that keeps tabs on tropical rainfall turned stormy last week. A National Academies' panel released an interim report urging the space agency to keep the satellite flying at least through the end of the year. But NASA officials insist they may have to shut it down as early as this summer, before the academy can finish its study.

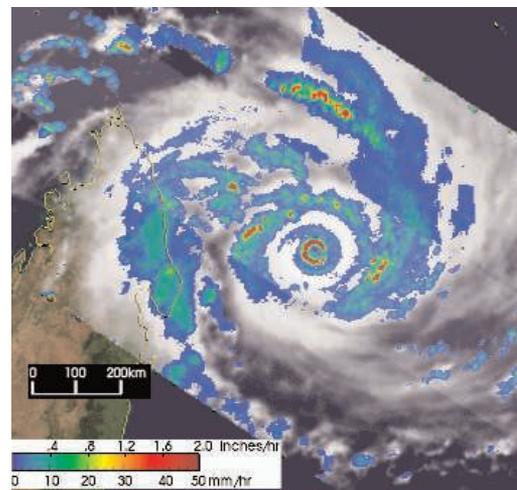
Both climate researchers and weather forecasters are eager to continue gathering data from the joint U.S.-Japanese Tropical Rainfall Monitoring Mission (TRMM) launched in 1997. They argue that the instruments could continue beaming back data for another 6 years. But NASA says that unless the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) agrees to take over operations, the constraints of time, money, and safety will force it to shut off instruments.

NASA requested the study after scientists and members of Congress criticized agency plans to halt operations last summer (*Science*, 13 August 2004, p. 927). The academy panel, chaired by Eugene Rasmusson of the University of Maryland, College Park, "strongly recommends continued operation of TRMM," at least through the end of 2005. The panel notes that TRMM's precipitation radar and microwave imager in particular provide a "powerful" set of data points for long-term understanding of rain-

fall patterns as well as near-term observation of hurricanes. It says TRMM also complements NOAA's polar weather satellites, which fly in a different orbit. "The instruments are in excellent shape," says project scientist Robert Adler of NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center in Greenbelt, Maryland.

But managers at NASA headquarters say they can't keep TRMM flying. "The real dilemma is physics, not money," says one NASA official. The longer the satellite remains in orbit, the greater the risk that it cannot be sent into a controlled reentry above the Pacific Ocean and the more resources—personnel to monitor the satellite—will be needed. So while it would cost \$4 million a year to continue operating TRMM, the reentry effort could take years and cost as much as \$16 million. Meanwhile, NASA wants to spend every available penny to build a Global Precipitation Mission that would provide broader coverage starting later in the decade.

NASA deputy science chief Ghassem Asrar said that, although TRMM has yielded "significant scientific data," the agency must remain "vigilant" to ensure a controlled reentry. And that could mean shutting off the instruments as early as summer. "The sooner



Rainmaker. Cyclone Gafilo pounds Madagascar last winter.

we prepare for deorbit, the better," he adds. TRMM advocates say an uncontrolled reentry does not pose a significant risk, however, citing a 2002 finding by NASA's own safety directorate. "The community is going to have to speak out," says Adler.

But wanting the data isn't enough. Somebody—NOAA, Congress, the White House, or Japan—must also come up with the money and persuade reluctant NASA managers to keep TRMM on the job. **—ANDREW LAWLER**

CLINICAL TRIALS

Facing Criticism, Industry Offers to Share Data

Five trade groups representing pharmaceutical companies worldwide are urging members to release more information about clinical trials. However, some see the proposals as a way to stay ahead of legislation that could compel the release of such information.

The companies have been under pressure since revelations that they kept trial data for antidepressants and other drugs secret. Congress failed to act last year on calls for a mandatory clinical trials registry, with penalties for noncompliance, but those bills are expected to reappear. The co-sponsor of one such bill, Representative Henry Waxman (D-CA), said last week that "nothing" in the industry's announcements "is going to dissuade me" from pursuing legislation. But the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America (PhRMA), a

Washington, D.C.-based trade group, says it would prefer for Congress to wait and "see if the voluntary efforts are going to work," says spokesperson Jeff Trewitt.

Voluntary registries in the past have included only a fraction of ongoing and completed trials. Seven of the nearly 100 members of the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry (ABPI) have participated in its registry, launched in May 2003. A 2003 study of U.S. cancer trials found that fewer than half of those sponsored by industry appeared on the government Web site (clinicaltrials.gov).

The U.K.'s ABPI is pinning its hopes on the World Health Organization's efforts to establish a global trials database by July; it will recommend that members post trials and results there.

The new PhRMA plan recommends adding trials for all ailments to clinicaltrials.gov.

Other groups behind the effort include the European Federation of Pharmaceutical Industries and Associations, the International Federation of Pharmaceutical Manufacturers & Associations, and the Japan Pharmaceutical Manufacturers Association. They recommend the release of "all clinical trials to determine a medicine's therapeutic benefit," says Richard Ley, an ABPI spokesperson.

Critics such as Drummond Rennie, deputy editor of the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, aren't optimistic. "Marketing forces and self-interest... are going to win out every time over the ethics of doing the right thing," he says.

—JENNIFER COUZIN

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Jennifer Couzin

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