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Dear Colleague Letter: 2023 Update on Science Support and Infrastructure in Antarctica

June 12, 2023

Dear Colleagues:

This letter provides information on the status and future of science support and infrastructure recapitalization in Antarctica. Since the last NSF [update](#) in April 2022, the COVID-19 pandemic has continued to severely impact the Office of Polar Program's (OPP) ability to support science on the continent, and those impacts have been exacerbated by increasing constraints on resources arising from inflation and the need for facility renewal.

The U.S. Antarctic Program (USAP) anticipated supporting a majority of COVID-19-impacted projects and new science projects in the 2022-2023 season. The highest priority science projects included fieldwork involving international collaborations, projects with critical time-series data, and projects involving instrument maintenance to prevent irreversible damage to, or loss of, science infrastructure. Additionally, construction on a critical new lodging building and a vehicle maintenance facility resumed in McMurdo this past season.

Unfortunately, delays in early-season cargo and passenger movements as well as COVID management protocols, hampered science deployments throughout the program. As a result, USAP is facing a severe shortage of logistics resources relative to the volume of deferred science that those resources must support.

Due to these compounding constraints, the upcoming 2023-2024 Antarctic season will be significantly curtailed. Program officers in the Antarctic Sciences Section (ANT) will contact Principal Investigators regarding project-related changes. For the next three field seasons (August 2023 through March 2026), already-funded science projects will be prioritized to the greatest extent possible. The imperative to address the backlog of funded projects and to improve critical infrastructure at McMurdo while addressing COVID-19 in our field stations and ships will make it very challenging to accommodate new initiatives with a large field component as described below. The USAP COVID protocol review process for the 2023-2024 season can be found in this [announcement](#), and protocols will be published in June

2023.

While OPP will continue to accept proposals involving [fieldwork](#), those requesting resources that were identified in the April 2022 Dear Colleague Letter as highly constrained are likely unsupported. USAP will not be able to support any OPP science exceeding Logistics Support Level 2 as defined at <https://www.usap.gov/proposalinformation/1750/>.

Additional resource constraints per location are as follows:

McMurdo Station will be unable to accommodate new, large field teams until the second half of the decade. However, smaller efforts involving support from McMurdo Station, starting in the 2025-2026 field season, are potentially supportable. LC-130 airlift support and both science traverse platforms are highly constrained through the 2024-2028 seasons, due to support of already-funded deep field and South Pole Station activities.

South Pole Station is saturated with already-funded projects and required critical infrastructure and maintenance activities that cannot be deferred until late in the decade. South Pole Station will continue to host the current suite of large-scale science projects; however, proposers seeking support for new projects at South Pole Station should consult the cognizant program officer to discuss alternative locations to accomplish science goals.

Palmer Station is fully allocated during the peak summer season but can support smaller projects in the early and late season in 2023-2024, 2024-2025, and 2025-2026, as well as overwinter projects for all years.

The **R/V Nathaniel B. Palmer** is fully allocated through 2023-2024 but has availability thereafter for new science proposals.

As NSF communicated in [February](#) 2023, the **R/V Laurence M. Gould** vessel charter will expire in June 2024. NSF is exploring options for the LMG vessel, including extending the charter and seeking alternate platforms. Please contact the cognizant program officer to discuss viable options.

As NSF navigates COVID-19 impacts, OPP will provide regular updates about resource availability. We encourage the community to continue to submit proposals for research that does [not require field support](#). More information will be available at [USAP.gov](https://www.usap.gov), through the OPP quarterly newsletter, Antarctic Community Office Hours, and the GEO/OPP Advisory Committee.

Sincerely,

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