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Author: Prof. John D. Rummel
SETI Institute, United States, rummelj@ecu.edu

Mr. Gerhard Kminek
European Space Agency (ESA), The Netherlands, gerhard.kminek@esa.int

COSPAR'S PLANETARY PROTECTION POLICY: UPDATING A CONSENSUS STANDARD

Abstract

COSPAR has concerned itself with questions of biological contamination and spaceflight since its inception, and has had an explicit policy on planetary protection since 1963. After 1963, the COSPAR policy consisted of a growing list of resolutions and decisions published in the COSPAR Information Bulletin, but the policy did not exist again as a single document until the World Space Congress in 2002. Subsequently, there has been wide support within and outside of COSPAR both for the development and maturation of the COSPAR policy and for its official adoption as more than a consensus “international standard” but for most purposes the fact that the policy thoroughly addresses a key aspect of Outer Space Treaty Article IX compliance, and is implementable in a “tuned” fashion for all robotic space missions and most human missions to Mars has allowed it to be generally acknowledged and put into use by the world’s space agencies. Within COSPAR the policy is maintained by the Panel on Planetary Protection, which was formed to support the Bureau and Council and to ensure that it reflects the most recent science of planetary environments and what is known about Earth organisms, and that it is compatible with the existing technical measures available to avoid biological and organic constituent contamination during space missions. As such, the biannual activities of the Panel at COSPAR Assemblies are intended to regularly upgrade the policy through recommendations to the Bureau and Council, as well as to track the status of various planned or ongoing missions compliant with the policy. Proposed changes are forwarded to the Bureau and Council subsequent to a Panel business meeting. Consideration of changes may be deferred until a later meeting of the Bureau, as necessary. Except for a nearly complete restructuring approved at the Graz Assembly in 1984, changes to the policy are generally evolutionary, rather than revolutionary – providing stability in planning missions. Likewise, COSPAR’s policy is as much a product of the expertise represented by Scientific Commissions B (planetary sciences) and F (life sciences) as it is by the Planetary Protection Panel. This paper will address several recent improvements to COSPAR communications and its policy development process focused on increasing the level of inclusiveness for new national and private-sector participants in planetary exploration. It is envisioned that these improvements will provide greater access to COSPAR expertise as well as greater insights into the policy going forward.