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PROFILE

Mary Ellen Kicza

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Leading the Way on the Restructured NPOESS

When Mary Ellen Kicza took over the top satellite job at NOAA in November 2006 she already had undergone an 11-month baptism of fire as her predecessor's deputy at a time when the agency was under intense congressional scrutiny. By the time she moved into her new office, NOAA had restructured and drastically scaled back its flagship space program, the National Polar-orbiting Operational Environmental Satellite System (NPOESS), which was behind schedule and way over budget.

It is now her job to make sure the mistakes the agency made on NPOESS are not repeated. Kicza, who came to NOAA with considerable experience working with both of the agency's partners on NPOESS — the U.S. Air Force and NASA — holds a bachelor's degree in electrical and electronics engineering from California State University, Sacramento, and a master's degree in business administration from the Florida Institute of Technology.

She began her career as an engineer at McClellan Air Force Base in California, where she developed and tested software for military satellite communications systems. She joined NASA's Kennedy Space Center in Florida in 1982, where she worked as lead engineer for data systems

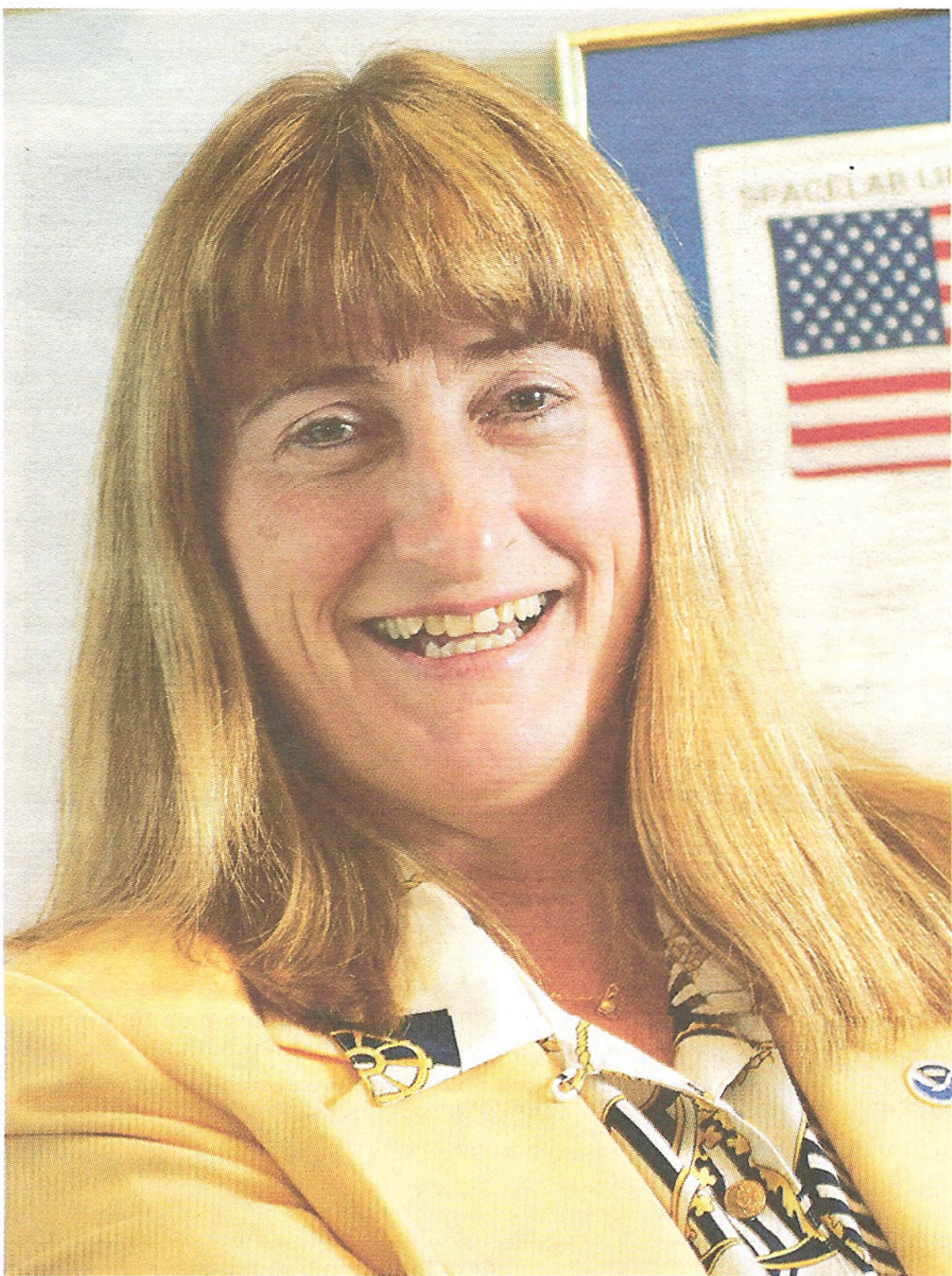
supporting the Atlas Centaur and Shuttle Centaur launch vehicles.

Kicza later served as NASA's deputy director for solar system exploration, assistant associate administrator for space science, associate center director for the Goddard Space Flight Center, associate administrator for biological and physical research, and associate deputy administrator for systems integration at NASA.

In addition to equipping her with a significant amount of NASA contacts that she can turn to for help when needed, Kicza says her NASA tenure gave her ideas that she has used to improve NOAA's oversight of its space portfolio, including a program management council to oversee select NOAA efforts.

The council conducts monthly reviews grading a program's performance against the plans for the effort, reviews proposed new activities or expansion of scope, and recommends changes or cancellation if necessary, according to its charter.

The program management council is just one instance where NOAA has sought to increase its senior leaders' visibility into space programs like NPOESS. Kicza talked about NOAA's work on NPOESS and other efforts during a May 24 telephone interview with *Space News* staff writer Jeremy Singer.



How are things progressing with NPOESS?

We have made significant progress on NPOESS since the restructuring last June.

Work on key instruments like the Visible Infrared Imager Radiometer Suite is on track for use on the NPOESS Preparatory Project launch in 2009. There were some issues with that instrument last summer and fall, but the contractor and government team has worked diligently to address the concerns. There is still an issue with cross talk on the sensor, but I think it is manageable.

Are you confident NPOESS can meet the planned 2013 launch date?

I have good confidence in that date. Additional schedule margin was incorporated into the program as part of the restructuring, and work on the spacecraft and ground systems has progressed steadily, so I don't have a concern regarding the launch date.

Has adding a new senior program executive to the NPOESS program improved oversight?

Air Force Brig. Gen. Susan Mashiko, who has been the first to serve in that role, is doing an excellent job, adding a layer of oversight that has been very beneficial. She is doing a number of things including laying in additional independent reviews of the program.

NOAA recently announced the decision to restore the Ozone Mapping and Profiler Suite's limb sensor to the NPOESS Preparatory Project, which had been a casualty of the

NPOESS restructuring. When will you decide whether to restore the limb sensor to the operational NPOESS satellites?

We're still working with NASA and the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy on a range of options for re-manifesting climate monitoring capabilities, and are working with other members of the community including the National Research Council. Decisions could come with the development of the 2009 budget request.

Some members of Congress, particularly on the House Science Committee, were very frustrated with NOAA's oversight of the NPOESS effort prior to the restructuring. Have you gotten any recent feedback from Capitol Hill?

I work with Hill staffers on a regular basis, and we provide regular updates on the program's progress. They're aware of all the steps that we have taken to increase our senior leadership's oversight of the NPOESS program and recognize that this has helped us resolve issues that have come up over the past year.

When NOAA recently revised its procurement strategy for the next generation of geostationary weather satellites it reduced the number of spacecraft from four to two, but left the door open to buying additional satellites under that same procurement. What would lead you to buy more than two satellites?

The additional cost of running two separate procurements will be part of the decision on whether to buy satellites three and four. Maturity of advanced technology that could be incorporated on those satellites is also

a consideration.

When do you plan to select a prime contractor for those satellites?

Our intent is to pick a contractor in the summer of 2008, which would keep us on track for an initial launch in 2014.

However, we look at the health of our existing constellations every six months, and that has implications for the next launches in the queue. So if the current generation of satellites is lasting longer than expected that could delay the first launch of the new geostationary satellites, but it would not affect the timeframe for the procurement.

U.S. Rep. Nick Lampson (D-Texas) recently asked NASA and NOAA about contingency plans for dealing with a disruption to hurricane monitoring data in case the QuickScat spacecraft, which is already past its design life, fails. Do you have a plan?

Right now we're looking at options for how to use data from other satellites as well as ground-based sensors to mitigate the loss of the QuickScat spacecraft, as well as how to improve our capabilities in this area over the long-term. The National Academy of Science's decadal survey highlighted the importance of this mission, and we're taking it seriously.

Do you believe that classified intelligence satellites could complement NOAA's climate monitoring work?

I can't comment on that.