



## Australian Government Silent on Synchrotron Budget While Scientists Plan Expansion

by [Lucas Laursen](#) on 11 May 2011, 2:58 PM | [Permanent Link](#) | [0 Comments](#)

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One might think that the managers of the Australian Synchrotron would be panicking given the news that neither the federal government nor the Victoria state government has addressed in their just-released budget proposals how the facility will be funded beyond June 2012, when its original 5-year financial plan ends. After all, the two governments currently provide most of the synchrotron's annual funding. Yet, at least publicly, those running the synchrotron are thinking not about how to save the young facility but how to grow it. "We are now in the process of wanting to expand," says Andrew Peele, a physicist at La Trobe University in Victoria who has been head of science at the synchrotron since late last year.

The facility, located in Melbourne and active since 2007, gets almost half of its funding from the federal government, an equivalent amount from the state of Victoria, and a smaller amount from affiliated institutions in return for a share in the synchrotron. It has an initial 5-year funding agreement that runs out in June 2012, so it surprised and worried some users of the facility when Victoria released a 2011-12 budget proposal last week that does not address long-term funding plans. And yesterday's Australian federal [budget announcement for 2011-12](#) contained no mention of the facility, although the budget [didn't cut overall science funding as much as some had feared](#).

Earlier this week, the Australian newspaper *The Age* reported, without naming its source, that the facility's board of directors had made contingency plans for a funding cutoff. *The Age* quoted federal Innovation Minister Kim Carr as saying that leaving the synchrotron's fate up in the air this late endangers its future. Peele, however, would tell *ScienceInsider* only that long-term funding "is always an issue for major research institutions, [and] there are a number of alternatives." Peele says the facility's leadership have applied to both Australia's federal government and the state of Victoria for funding boosts to expand the facility.

Still, users of the synchrotron are anxious, says biochemist Ian Smith of Monash University in Melbourne, who is involved in the construction of a new beam line designed for medical imaging experiments. Smith says he is "hopeful rather than confident" that state and federal governments will reveal secure funding plans soon. Other large science facilities are also evaluated in 5-year increments, he notes, "so it wouldn't be unusual for a review of synchrotron operations to happen at the last minute."

Despite [the sudden firing of its director in late 2009](#), followed by months of interim leadership, the synchrotron's scientific productivity has "grown pretty much exponentially," which should help its case for expansion, Peele says. Indeed, Ted Baker, the head of the Australian Synchrotron's scientific advisory committee (SAC), said earlier this year that Peele and new director Keith Nugent had [put the facility back on track](#). Another SAC member, Lisa Miller, a biophysical chemist at Brookhaven National Laboratory in Upton, New York, agrees that since the recent leadership appointments things have "been moving very quickly in a positive direction," though she noted that given the pace of data analysis and publication, it is still too early to quantify any changes in scientific productivity since the changeover.

Still, users of the facility are enthusiastic about its achievements so far and its potential; it's one of just two synchrotrons in the Southern Hemisphere and has given Australian scientists local access to powerful beams of light to probe proteins and other substances. They previously had to take samples abroad to other synchrotrons. "We're doing stuff we never used to do before," says structural biologist James Whisstock of Monash University. "Last year, [we solved the structure of perforin](#)," a protein that helps destroy harmful cells in the body.

Victoria's innovation minister Louise Asher, whose Liberal party won last November's state elections, told *The Age*

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that the facility "will have to go through the budget and expenditure-review committee process." The newspaper also reported that she will visit the facility in the next few weeks.

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