News in focus

CHRIS GUNN/NASA

The James Webb Space Telescope (shown being packed up for launch last year) was designed to probe the early Universe.

EXCLUSIVE: DOCUMENTS REVEAL NASA'S INTERNAL STRUGGLES OVER RENAMING WEBB TELESCOPE

E-mails show agency's controversial response to astronomers concerned about past LGBT+ discrimination.

By Alexandra Witze

Internal NASA documents obtained by *Nature* reveal fresh details about the agency's investigation last year into whether to rename its flagship James Webb Space Telescope (JWST). A group of astronomers had led a community petition to change the name, alleging that the telescope's namesake, former NASA chief James Webb, had been complicit in the persecution and firing of gay and lesbian federal employees during his career in the US government in the 1950s and 1960s.

In September, NASA announced that it would not change the name of the telescope, because it had no evidence to support the allegations. But the agency controversially did not release a report summarizing its investigation or decision-making.

The internal documents obtained by *Nature* and others through freedom-of-information (FOI) requests show that, while making its decision, the agency was aware of a 1969 appeals ruling suggesting that it had been customary at NASA to fire people over suspicions about their sexual orientation. The case involved a former NASA employee who had been fired in 1963 because supervisors thought he was gay. This was when Webb was leading the agency.

NASA's acting chief historian, Brian Odom, says he has not found any information in NASA's archives to suggest that firing people on account of their sexual orientation was agency policy under Webb. He and a contract historian, whose identity has not been disclosed, will soon visit other historical archives to continue to look into Webb's history. These archives have been closed owing to the COVID-19 pandemic but will open again

in the next few weeks. Odom says he will share information about what the historians find with the astronomy community.

But the FOI documents shed light on how NASA has looked into the matter so far. The e-mail correspondences "paint a stark portrait of how astronomers outside the LGBTQ+ community dismiss the experiences of their queer colleagues, and make it plain to see that discrimination against queer people is alive and well in astronomy today", say the four astronomers who led the community petition. They are Lucianne Walkowicz at the Adler Planetarium in Chicago, Illinois; Chanda Prescod-Weinstein at the University of New Hampshire in Durham; Brian Nord at the Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory in Batavia, Illinois; and Sarah Tuttle at the University of Washington in Seattle.

Agency influencer

Webb ran NASA between 1961 and 1968, when the Apollo programme to send astronauts to the Moon was at the height of its development. He died in 1992. Another former NASA administrator, Sean O'Keefe, named the telescope after Webb in 2002 to recognize his leadership in government and his commitment to making science a key part of the agency. Barbara Webb, James Webb's daughter-in-law, says: "We wouldn't have gotten to the Moon when we did in 1969 without his leadership." She adds: "And the telescope is an amazing instrument, the greatest scientific and engineering instrument ever created — it's very fitting that it's named for him."

Barbara Webb says that her family does not believe James Webb discriminated against anyone. "I don't think that saying he was a bigot is accurate in any sense," she says. "He had more integrity than anybody I ever knew."

Some astronomers have argued that whatever Webb's personal beliefs, the telescope should be renamed because he was a top-ranking official — and therefore had influence — at a time when the US federal government systematically identified and fired employees because of suspicions about homosexuality. This period of history, known as the lavender scare, began at the US Department of State around 1950, when Webb was the number-two official there.

Launched in December, the US$10-billion JWST is a landmark observatory supported by NASA, as well as the European and Canadian space agencies. The telescope, which is expected to make its first scientific observations no earlier than June, is designed to peer at galaxies near the dawn of time and explore other cosmic frontiers. Its name will dominate astronomical publications for years to come.

Current NASA administrator Bill Nelson made the choice to keep the name. He has not provided any further statements.

The new FOI documents provide only a partial glimpse into NASA's decision-making. They encompass some of the correspondence between NASA employees about the agency's investigation into Webb from 1 January to 13 October of last year. *Nature* filed its request because the agency had released few details about its September decision.

Although the documents reveal that key decisions were made in meetings and not by e-mail, they still show agency officials wrestling with how to investigate the allegations and control public messaging over the controversy. As early as April 2021, an external researcher flagged wording from the 1969 court ruling to NASA officials. It came in the case of Clifford Norton, who had appealed against being fired from NASA for "immoral, indecent, and disgraceful conduct". In the decision, the chief judge wrote that the person who had fired Norton had said that he was a good employee and asked whether there was a way to keep him on. Whomever he consulted in the personnel office told him that it was a "custom within the agency" to fire people for "homosexual conduct".

"That is hardly the kind of transparent process that gives the external community confidence."

"I think you will find this paragraph to be troubling," wrote the external researcher to Eric Smith, the JWST's programme scientist at NASA in Washington DC. "'A custom within the agency' sounds pretty bad."

A white paper drawn up by NASA, and described as not meant for public release, says: "This shows that NASA had decided that removal of homosexual employees would be its policy. They had a choice during Webb's tenure as administrator to set or change that policy."

James Webb led NASA from 1961 to 1968.

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Also last April, the e-mails show, Paul Hertz, the head of NASA's astrophysics division, contacted more than ten members of the astrophysics community to ask their opinions about changing the telescope's name. "Nobody said they would be disappointed if we did not change the name," Hertz wrote to his manager. However, none of them were known members of the LGBT+ community, Hertz also wrote.

When asked about this by *Nature*, Hertz said he has had numerous conversations on the issue with "members of many communities, including those from LGBTQ+".

A lack of rationale

In October, after NASA announced that it would not rename the telescope, Hertz summarized community reaction in an e-mail to another NASA employee: "The problem for most of the astrophysics community is not the decision itself, but the lack of rationale to explain why this is the appropriate decision. (For some people, the problem is the decision.)" He also pointed out that NASA had not transmitted the decision broadly, but rather e-mailed Nelson's one-sentence statement to a small group of news outlets, including *Nature*. "That is hardly the kind of transparent process that gives the external community confidence," he wrote.

Walkowicz and their colleagues go much further. "This is harm from a community we have committed substantive time to and which we are passionate about," they say.

In November, the Astrophysics Advisory Committee, a group of independent researchers who advise NASA, asked Hertz for a written report on NASA's decision. "The rationale and explanation from the Agency were wholly insufficient, non-transparent, and uninformative regarding the naming decision communicated to the astronomical community and other stakeholders regarding the James Webb Space Telescope," the committee wrote. It has not yet received such a report.

NASA states on its website and elsewhere that it is committed to diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility. "We know this best enables us to access everyone and everything we need to best accomplish our missions," its policy states.

The revelations about NASA's decision regarding the JWST come at a time of increasing concern over the way the agency handles issues of identity. Last month, employees at the agency's Goddard Space Flight Center in Greenbelt, Maryland, were told that they would no longer be able to include pronouns, such as she/her or they/them, in their display names in agency computer systems. After the move was discussed on Reddit and the astronomy community reacted negatively on other social platforms, NASA put out a statement that employees could continue to include pronouns in their e-mail signature blocks.