Title of Investigation: Adaptive Optics System for 1.6 Meter Solar Telescope in Big Bear
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Project Summary

New Jersey Institute of Technology (NJIT), in collaboration with the University of Hawaii (UH) and the Korean National Observatory, is building the world's largest aperture solar telescope, the 1.6-m aperture, off-axis, New Solar Telescope (NST) to replace Big Bear Solar Observatory (BBSO)'s principal telescope with its 65-cm aperture. The project is well under the way, the first-light is anticipated at the end of 2006. Under prior NSF/MRI support to NJIT, in collaboration with the National Solar Observatory, we have successfully developed two 76-element Adaptive Optics systems (AO-76) for the current BBSO 65-cm telescope and the NSO 76-cm Dunn Telescope.

To fully utilize the scientific capability of NST as early as possible, we propose to transfer the AO-76 system, with modification, to the NST immediately after the telescope is installed. This proposal seeks funding for this task. The AO-76 is a high-order system for the 65-cm BBSO telescope, which is successfully operating in both the visible and near infrared (NIR) ranges. We understand that, when integrated into the NST, the AO-76 will be a lower order AO in the visible. However, we anticipate that it will have full capability to correct the seeing in the NIR. More specifically, under the median seeing condition at BBSO, the predicted Strehl ratio at $1.6\mu m$ is above 0.8. For about 10% of the time, the predicted Strehl ratio at $0.5\mu m$ is above 0.5. Therefore, our initial scientific focus for NST will be in NIR research of solar atmosphere and its activity. Diffraction limited observations will also be made during the good seeing periods in the visible. The key tasks in this proposal includes the optical design and subsequent setup/test of the AO system for NST. Both the refractive and reflective designs will be considered.

Over the last two years, we have developed a state-of-art NIR imaging magnetograph system (IRIM) that has attained its first scientific light at BBSO. The specific scientific objectives are: (1) High cadence, high resolution studies of solar flares; (2) Evolution of magnetic fields associated with solar activity; and (3) Dynamics of Kilo-gauss magnetic flux tubes.

In sum, we directly address two criteria required in an NSF proposal:

(1) Intellectual merit: The AO equipped NST will be the largest aperture solar telescope, located in one of the best observing sites. It will enable new, cutting edge science. Previous research has already demonstrated our ability by the development of the two most successful solar AO systems in the world.

(2) Broad Impact: The development of the proposed AO system is the first solid step toward an even higher-order AO system for the NST, which will also enable us to further explore Multi-Conjugate Adaptive Optics (MCAO). This effort is highly relevant to the development of MCAO systems for the nighttime telescopes. The scientific results will be extremely important in the understanding of the dynamics of magnetic fields on a fine spatial scale, as well as space weather monitoring and forecasting. The scientific objectives will also be closely linked to several key research topics in nighttime astronomy: the physics of stellar coronal heating, stellar magnetic fields and stellar flares. This project has strong integrated research and education impacts. A post-doc, a Ph.D. student and an undergraduate will participate in the project. Our data will be open to the scientific community.