



Marathon man: Rolf Densing, Director of ESA Space Programmes at DLR

01 February 2013

By Elisabeth Mittelbach

"Challenges are there to be mastered," Rolf Densing said, grinning. This might well be his life motto, both professionally and privately. Since 2009, the doctor of physics has been the Director of Space Programmes at the DLR Space Administration, where he is responsible for Germany's involvement in the European Space Agency's research, technology, and infrastructure programmes. A budget totalling roughly 770 million Euros passes across his desk every year – a large quantity of money that must be invested responsibly and far-sightedly. Densing is therefore not just an expert on ESA matters; he sees himself primarily as a networker: "DLR – and consequently I – play the role of moderator with regard to Germany's engagement with ESA. We need the backing of industry, the scientific community and politicians so that we can speak with one voice instead of representing individual interests." And, he comments, to do justice to this approach, what is needed is mainly the power of persuasion, inside knowledge, a healthy dose of ambition, and perseverance. And one more thing: "A team that works well together."

Rolf Densing has been working in the space sector for more than 25 years. After completing his studies at the Max Planck Institute for Radio Astronomy and Bonn University, he began his scientific career at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, on the east coast of the United States. From 1992 to 1995, he worked as a project manager for the space science programme of the former DARA, the German Space Agency, which is now the DLR Space Administration. Among other things, he worked on a series of scientific missions with the German Astro-SPAS Platform, which flew on the Space Shuttle missions STS-51 (1993), STS-66 (1994), STS-80 (1996) and STS-85 (1997). In 1999, the Rhinelander went on to take on a managerial role. After three years of work at DLR's Washington office, he moved to DLR headquarters in Cologne as Head of the Executive Office. From 2003 onwards, the leisure sports enthusiast headed the ESA affairs department at the DLR Space Administration until the DLR Senate appointed him Director of Programmes in 2009.

In the right place at the right time

"Looking back, I find that I was often in the right place at the right time," he says today, adding that much was due to good fortune. But his character had something to do with this as well: being open to new things, fixing your gaze on the horizon and never losing sight of essential objectives. When the ESA Council at Ministerial Level in Naples was being organised in November 2012, his approach was "to campaign for us and our plan with all our partners, implementing a homogenous and transparent approach guided by Germany's space strategy." An astute analyst, he believes that spontaneity is as much part of the business, in practice, as reliability. In other words, have your suitcase packed and keep a clear head. "In the run-up to the conference, I went to Paris nearly every week from September onwards, visiting ESA headquarters, the French space agency, CNES, or the Arianespace Supervisory Board." And he adds: "What is more, early on the Friday before the Council I was told that I would accompany the leading ministers of the European space scene to Geneva in the evening, following an invitation of the Swiss delegation." Once again, the meeting was about the future of the Ariane launcher.

Taking on future challenges like an athlete

To relax, Rolf Densing turns to sports: swimming, cycling and running as far as his feet will carry him – preferably every day, and in greater quantities than the often-cited 'recommended doses'. Marathon and triathlon distances are his playing field. He competes in several national and international events every year. In his own way, he even approached the ESA summit in Naples 'in a sporting spirit'. After a 19-hour 'marathon' negotiation on the first day of the Council meeting, 53-year-old Rolf Densing appeared comparatively at ease and relaxed, from the outside at least. Under positive stress, one might also say. Obviously, for DLR's Programme Director for ESA affairs, an adrenaline rush is no reason to be concerned. "Germany is the leading force within ESA, but we must live up to the part," he said at the end of our conversation. "We are at the top of the return statistics – the relationship between our input, or the money that we invest in ESA, and the output, that is the money that flows back to Germany through our participation in ESA programmes, is very well balanced."

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Rolf Densing



Rolf Densing is Director of Space Programmes at the DLR Space Administration in Bonn.

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Rolf Densing likes challenges



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German delegation at the ESA Ministerial Council



The leaders of the German delegation at the Mostra d'Oltremare conference centre in Naples before the start of the ESA Council at Ministerial Level on 20 November 2012 (from left): Johann-Dietrich Wörner, Chairman of the DLR Executive Board and Head of the delegation at council level, Peter Hintze, Parliamentary State Secretary in the Federal Ministry of Economics and Technology and head of the delegation at the ministerial level, and Rolf Densing, DLR Director of Space Programmes.

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