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19 August 2010

Senator Barbara Mikulski, Chair
Senator Richard Shelby, Ranking Minority Member
U.S. Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Commerce, Science
and Related Agencies
144 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Representative Alan Mollohan, Chair
Representative Frank Wolf, Ranking Minority Member
U.S. House of Representatives Appropriations Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice,
Science, and Related Agencies
H-310 Capitol
Washington, DC 20515

Senator Bill Nelson, Chair
Senator David Vitter, Ranking Minority Member
U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Science and Space
428 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Representative Gabrielle Giffords, Chair
Representative Pete Olsen, Ranking Minority Member
U.S. House Subcommittee on Space and Aeronautics
2325 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Senators and Representatives,

President Obama has proposed a new plan and budget for U.S. human space exploration this year, one that would shift routine access to low Earth orbit to commercial launch vehicles (such as Atlas, Delta, and the new Falcon) and focus NASA's human space exploration program on interplanetary destinations: beyond the Moon, near-Earth asteroids and, ultimately, Mars.

We are excited about this refocusing of NASA's activities, and our communications with the public tell us they are excited, too. We are, however, concerned about omissions and a lack of coherence in the four committees' versions of this bill. In particular, among the various bills we note the following:

- None include a plan to restore U.S. technical capability to launch astronauts to space once the shuttle is retired. At best there are directions that -- even if followed -- will likely lead to a “launch gap” years longer than was planned, even with Ares, and certainly longer than could be expected from the commercial launch industry, if they are supported.
- Instead, we support government – private partnerships to develop U.S. designed and built commercial launch vehicles, proven ones like the Atlas and Delta, and new ones like the Falcon.
- No exploration goals are set other than vague citations of building capability to ultimately fly to destinations beyond Earth orbit. Instead, we support identification of specific targets such as going beyond the Moon for the first time, then to a near-Earth asteroid, then to the orbit of Mars, and then to Mars itself. As Gemini and the early Apollo missions engaged the Nation on the way to the Moon landing, so too can steps into the solar system engage the Nation on the way to Mars.
- The various bills push to start “heavy-lift launch vehicle” development sooner than proposed by the Administration, despite having no destinations or flight goals for such a rocket for at least a decade. We strongly support American development of a deep-space rocket, but we believe that premature development through political legislation rather than technological studies could result in huge waste and eventual delays. Thus, we suggest support for a technology program to develop and evaluate competing approaches and to complete a preliminary design before committing to the final selection. A shorter actual development time will lead to a lower-cost project.
- The Administration’s proposed exploration and space technology programs are deeply cut. This exacerbates the situation of the past decade when NASA technology programs were eviscerated and the agency was unable to develop new technologies that could reduce cost or enhance performance. We support restoration of NASA’s proposed technology funding.

We do appreciate very much that, by approving the President’s proposed increase in NASA funding over the next five years, all the congressional committees involved support space and Earth science, robotic planetary exploration, new science initiatives, and NASA generally. We also appreciate the support for increased scientific use and international collaboration on the International Space Station, which will advance space exploration. As representatives of the Planetary Society, the largest space interest group in the world, we can assure you these programs have widespread public support.

Building a sustained and popular program of human space exploration requires both ambitious goals and robust partnerships. The Columbia shuttle accident caused many to question the high cost and significant risks of human space flight, but the Nation wisely decided that those costs and risks could be justified if the goals were truly great. That led to revamping NASA’s human space organization to focus on exploration. Exploration requires not just supporting an agency like NASA, but also building public and private (including commercial) partnerships, supporting international cooperation, and advancing science and technology. Those elements are all there in the fiscal year

2011 budget now before the Congressional committees. We ask your help in bringing them together into a coherent plan for human space exploration.

As noted, we are concerned that the path on which the legislative process is proceeding will lead to an incomplete plan, which would be worse than no plan at all. We ask for your help and leadership, and that of your colleagues on the full Committees, to prevent that. This may require stepping back from each of the Congressional bills now passed by Committees and refocusing on the whole. Congress' interests and the Administration's interests are more alike than different. We urge your support for a new NASA plan.

Thank you very much for your consideration.



Jim Bell
President



Heidi Hammel
Vice President



Louis Friedman
Executive Director



Bill Nye
Executive Director Designate