

OPENING STATEMENT

The Honorable Ralph M. Hall (R-TX)

Chairman, U.S. House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology

NASA Human Spaceflight Past, Present, and Future: Where Do We Go From Here?

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Good morning. I'd like to welcome everyone here for today's hearing to discuss America's human space exploration program, and the vision, goals, resources, hardware, and commitment that go into it. It is hard to imagine a more qualified panel of witnesses with more personal insight and pertinent experience than the one today. I'd like to sincerely thank all of you for taking time out of your busy schedules to be here and share with this Committee and Congress your wisdom and your insight, gained through considerable first-hand experience.

NASA's human space exploration program is fundamental to the agency's mission and identity. And it is synonymous with the image of American leadership around the world. The Mercury, Gemini, Apollo, and more recently Space Shuttle and Space Station programs, have had a profound and lasting beneficial effect on our country. They've largely defined NASA and the spirit and technological prowess of America in the eyes of other nations that few of us in this room can fully appreciate. For an agency with a budget that consumes less than one-half of one percent of federal spending – and human space exploration is about a 20 percent of that - NASA is renowned at home and around the world as a quintessential American enterprise whose feats no one has been able to duplicate. To be sure, Russia was the first into space and the first to orbit a human, but after that, no other country had had the commitment, resources, technical expertise, and capability to land men on the moon or to fly a reusable fleet of spaceplanes.

We are now at a cross-road. The 30 year-old Shuttle program has been retired; the International Space Station is built; and for the next several years our country is without any domestic capability of getting American astronauts to and from space.

Last fall, after more than a year of protracted debate, the Administration and Congress came to an agreement allowing NASA to proceed with its plan to seed development of a commercial launch industry to take crew to and from low Earth orbit. But the central tenet was agreement to build a Space Launch System and Multi Purpose Crew Vehicle to ensure a future capability to take astronauts into deep space. While Congress and the Administration concurred on these two initiatives, there continues to be differences over resources and schedules that will guide these new programs, and with respect to deep space, we still don't have a destination, which is an important consideration.

Last week NASA announced plans to proceed with development of a new heavy lift launch system that will enable our deep space program. Recently released proposals indicate just two flights over the next ten years. If NASA doesn't move out quickly, more and more of our industrial base, skilled engineers and technicians, and hard-won capabilities are at risk of withering away. America needs leadership with a compelling vision, and the strength of commitment, or bright young engineers about to enter our workforce will likely look to disciplines other than aerospace if faced with such a protracted development cycle.

I am also concerned that we need a viable backup system to ferry astronauts to and from the ISS should commercial crew launch companies not be able to deliver as hoped. It is my sincere hope that NASA, commercial companies, and Congress can work through challenging technical, legal, and regulatory issues in the months and years ahead related to the nascent commercial crew model. However, as the NASA Authorization Act of 2010 proscribed, we must be ready to service the ISS if our hopes of a commercial crew industry are not realized. And just as importantly, the SLS and MPCV programs begin the work of ensuring that America has an ongoing long-term exploration program.

Today's witnesses are among the best and the brightest in their respective fields; test pilots, astronauts, administrators, and scientists. Collectively, their years of aerospace experience may even exceed my age, which gives me no small comfort. I want to thank them again for agreeing to testify, and I look forward to hearing the benefit of their wisdom and experience.