OPENING STATEMENT
The Honorable Ralph Hall (R-TX), Chairman
U.S. House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology
An Overview of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration Budget for Fiscal Year 2013.

March 7, 2012

Mr. Bolden, I want to thank you, as always, for taking time from your busy schedule to appear before our committee. I realize a lot of work and effort goes into these appearances, and I also understand you testified this morning before the Senate Commerce Committee, making this an especially long day for you and your staff.

We're here today to discuss the President's 2013 budget request for NASA. The proposal essentially comes in at the same spending level as this fiscal year, although when taking into account inflationary effects, the agency's purchasing power is slightly diminished. But given the tough fiscal times we are in, I think the agency's top-line request is reasonable.

NASA's human spaceflight activities account for about 45 percent of the agency's budget, supporting the International Space Station, development of a new heavy-lift launch system, and development of commercial crew and cargo capabilities. I continue to be deeply concerned that the commercial cargo program's schedule keeps slipping to the right. All of us understand how important commercial cargo is to our International Space Station, and it is my sincere hope that both SpaceX and Orbital will complete successful demonstration flights later this spring.

Commercial crew gives me greater pause, however. I have yet to be convinced that a viable commercial market will emerge for human orbital missions other than NASA-funded ferry flights to and from ISS. Yet NASA continues to subscribe to the theory that there is a sufficient market to sustain at least two commercial crew launch systems, and is putting large sums of tax dollars at risk to pursue this strategy. I hope my misgivings are wrong, but based on what I've seen to date, I'm not optimistic.

I am also troubled by NASA's inability to impose crew safety requirements on participants in the upcoming round of the Commercial Crew Development program. The third phase, which will kick off this summer, funds participants under Space Act agreements to design fully integrated launch systems. While I understand that companies have every incentive to comply with NASA's safety standards, it is my strong conviction that at this stage of design, there should be no discretion about safety. NASA should have unfettered insight of the systems before companies begin actual production.

Lastly, with regard to the human spaceflight program, I continue to be frustrated that the Space Launch System and Orion crew capsule are not being developed quickly enough. Current plans indicate they won't be operational until 2021, which conceivably comes after the ISS is retired.

SLS and Orion deserve higher priority. Should the Russians or commercial providers suffer any disruptions, we will have no means of getting crews to or from ISS.

Turning now to NASA's science portfolio, I am generally pleased with the budget request, but do have issues with two related programs: NASA's decision to withdraw from the 2016 and 2018 ExoMars missions with the European Space Agency, and the proposed reduction to the Planetary Sciences budget.

For the last several years, both Congress and NASA have repeatedly expressed the desire to more fully collaborate with international partners to help defray the costs of future flagship missions. There is a growing acknowledgement from many quarters that NASA simply can't afford to go it alone, and if we are to pursue ambitious missions that promise to do exciting science, NASA needs to engage and work with other nations to share in the burden of funding, building and operating these complex projects.

The ExoMars missions are of high importance and visibility to the Europeans, and NASA, seemingly in good faith, agreed in 2009 to join forces with the European Space Agency (ESA). But with the unveiling of the 2013 budget, NASA has reneged on its commitment, forcing the Europeans to search for other partners if they hope to keep ExoMars alive.

There is no doubt in my mind that NASA's decision to withdraw from ExoMars seriously imperils the ability of ESA to keep moving forward with the program. It also imperils NASA's ability to be viewed as a trustworthy partner on any future collaborations.

The decision likewise flies in the face of the latest planetary decadal survey which named Mars sample return as its top priority. And it ignores the wisdom of our own community of scientists who labored hard to put together a well-reasoned roadmap.

Speaking now about Planetary Sciences – as well as Mars – I am puzzled that NASA would choose to cut one of its most productive and successful science programs in this era of tough choices. Typically good behavior is rewarded, but in this instance, it appears that NASA's successes at Mars, Saturn, and Mercury have garnered the opposite reaction.

Mr. Administrator, I trust you'll take these concerns in the sober spirit in which they were delivered, and convey them to the White House. We want NASA to succeed in all its endeavors, but we seem to disagree on how best to achieve that goal.

I now recognize my good friend and fellow Texan, Eddie Bernice Johnson, for her opening statement.

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