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Congressional Hearing Summary
The National Aeronautics and Space Administration
Fiscal Year 2012 Budget Request
Committee on Science, Space, and Technology
March 2, 2011

Chair: [Ralph M. Hall](#) (R-TX) ([opening statement](#))
Ranking Member: [Eddie Bernice Johnson](#) (D-TX)

Witness

- Major General Charles F. Bolden, Jr. (Ret.), Administrator, National Aeronautics and Space Administration ([prepared statement](#))

Background

This was the first Congressional hearing to debate in detail President Obama's FY2012 budget request for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), released February 14, 2011. The request, \$18.7 billion, would fund NASA at the same level appropriated in FY2010, but would represent a \$300 million reduction when [compared](#) to the \$19 billion authorized for FY2011 in the 2010 NASA Authorization Act. Administration officials have stated that the request fully funds the initiatives directed by Congress in the Authorization Act, but the request was surrounded by a lot of [uncertainty](#), in large part due to the lack of an approved budget for the ongoing 2011 fiscal year. With a Republican majority in the House promising to cut back federal spending dramatically and budget restraint a growing imperative for both parties, NASA's outlook for budgetary growth seems grim. With these constraints in mind, this hearing focused on the overall priorities reflected in the request, particularly in the human spaceflight account, and the impact that these funding changes could have on the agency's ability to carry out its missions. For more information, see the [charter](#) and [webcast](#) for the hearing.

Nuggets

"Frankly, we're exasperated that NASA is not listening to our message."

Chairman Hall

"I had thought that the administration agreed with the compromise that was enacted into law [in the 2010 Authorization Act] but I'm afraid that I do not see it reflected in the NASA budget request."

Ranking Member Johnson

(On the cancelation of NPOESS due to cost overruns) "Your most important job, General, is that it never happens again and that we never waste billions of dollars in managing programs as that program was managed."

Representative Rohrabacher

"I don't do global warming; I do Earth science."

General Bolden

Hearing Highlights

The first hearing of House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology (HSS&T) specifically on NASA's FY2012 budget request revealed general dissatisfaction with the President's request. Constant mention was made of the difficulties of the current fiscal environment, fueling strong comments on the imperative to abide by the 2010 Authorization Act. Of particular emphasis was the relative priority given in the request between commercial crew transportation investment and a new NASA-developed Space Launch System (a heavy lift launch vehicle or HLLV) and Multi-Purpose Crew Vehicle (MPCV). HLLV and MPCV, combined under Human Exploration Capabilities in the budget request, will be capable of enabling human space exploration beyond low Earth orbit (LEO), but will also serve as a backup for crew transportation to LEO in the event commercial crew services fail to materialize. Members repeatedly stated that the request upset the priority given to them by Congress. This and other main points of the discussion are summarized below.

FY2012 Funding Priorities

Chairman Ralph Hall (R-TX), who was the Committee's Ranking Member in the previous Congress, said in his opening remarks that "someone in the White House has very little interest in working with the Congress." For him, problems began with the Obama Administration's decision to cancel the Vision for Space Exploration's Constellation Program – which directed the development of vehicles for human access to the Moon and Mars - without providing "the basis for its cost estimates or credible plans," despite repeated requests from Congress to do so.

He went on to describe the 2010 NASA Authorization Act as a product of compromise, noting that while "commercial crew was not ignored," it prioritizes the development of the HLLV and MPCV. In spite of this, he continued, "the Administration's FY2012 budget proposal completely flips the priorities of the Act, significantly increasing Commercial Crew funding while making deep cuts to the Human Exploration Capabilities accounts." He noted that "the new budget proposal disregards – yes,

ignores - our Authorization law” and urged NASA to abide by such directions to “help reduce the surprise, frustration and anger from those that have been [its] greatest supporters.”

Ranking Member Eddie Bernice Johnson (D-TX) said in her opening remarks that she was “disappointed in the budget request,” and agreed with Chairman Hall’s contention that it contradicts Congressional wishes. “I had thought that the Administration agreed with the compromise that was enacted into law, but I’m afraid that I do not see it reflected in the NASA budget request,” she said.

The budget request, continued Johnson, contributes to the “start-stop approach” which has negative impacts on the existing skilled workforce and on attracting young students to careers in space-related fields. She argued that the most “constructive” approach would be to consider the budget request “as the beginning of a discussion, not the end.” She asked the Administrator to tell Congress what his agency could do with the budget request, as opposed to what it could not. Her comment was made in reference to an interim [report](#) sent to Congress in January on the Human Exploration Capabilities’ designs that concluded NASA could not build them within the budget or timetable authorized by law.

When presenting the main components of the budget request, NASA Administrator Charles F. Bolden, Jr., said that while it “funds all major elements of the [Authorization] Act,” Administration officials also had to make difficult decisions to make necessary reductions in some areas. Speaking specifically to the criticisms that the human spaceflight budget does not prioritize human exploration beyond LEO, he showed a pie chart which split up the account’s funds – which total 44% of the NASA budget - in the following way: 40% for the International Space Station (ISS), 39% for Human Exploration Capabilities, 12% for Commercial Spaceflight -- which he said is “almost the smallest piece of our human spaceflight pie” -- and 9% in closeout costs for the Space Shuttle program.

With respect to the disparity in funding priorities between the Act and the budget request, Chairman Hall said that while stimulating commercial competition “is a worthy goal,” it should not be pursued at the expense of safe access to ISS, which he believes requires NASA to build its own crew transportation system and not rely solely on commercial crew. “Frankly, we’re exasperated that NASA is not listening to our message” he said, and asked for justification of the changes. “I get your message loud and clear,” replied Gen. Bolden and defended these changes on the basis of ensuring crew safety. He said that “the best, most efficient - perhaps fastest - way to do it [crew transport to ISS] is by relying on the commercial entities.”

Gen. Bolden also stated that the HLLV and MPCV “are not being built to double as LEO [transport] vehicles,” because that would be “inefficient,” but clarified that they could serve as backups should the commercial ventures fail. When Representative Sandy Adams (R-FL) questioned him on this point, he expanded by saying that the reason he would not want to use the HLLV/MPCV system for LEO transportation is because it would imply that one of the commercial crew vehicles had been lost along with its crew,

and hence the need for a backup. Returning to the imperative of crew safety, he repeated that the reason he had made the “tough decision” to reduce funds from Human Exploration Capabilities and increase Commercial Crew funding is because of the need to ensure safe access to the ISS. While NASA will continue using the Russian Soyuz for ISS transport for the time being, he wants to have “American-made rockets by American-made companies” as soon as possible. Consequently, he argued, he would put “every dime” he could to the commercial effort to reduce risk and speed this transition.

Debating the Commercial Crew Option

One of the few voices of support in Congress for emphasizing the commercial crew investment, Representative Dana Rohrabacher (R-CA) submitted for the record a letter from “50 leaders of the space community” who urged NASA to “fully fund” the ISS commercial crew initiative, arguing that this would allow the agency to focus its own efforts on exploration beyond LEO. Representative Rohrabacher said that the private sector had reached a “technological stage” that enabled it to reduce space transportation costs. Specific numbers, though, were not readily available. When asked how much money would be saved by relying on commercial providers as opposed to continuing flying the Space Shuttle, Gen. Bolden said it would be “pure conjecture,” because no commercial flights have yet been flown, but that he expected it would be substantial.

Representative Scott Rigell (R-VA) said that the answer to the question over savings is “essential” and pressed the Administrator to expand on his previous comment. Gen. Bolden responded by saying that human spaceflight cannot be separated from science, implying that the savings accrued by bolstering the private launch sector would spill over into other NASA activities. Rising launch costs, he explained, were forcing changes in NASA’s science portfolio. Commercial competition would reduce costs to NASA – namely by eliminating overhead costs – so that “I can fly more science,” he said.

FY2011 Funding Uncertainty

Discussion also turned to the more immediate impacts of congressional delays in finalizing the FY2011 budget for NASA and other government agencies. Ranking Member Johnson asked what priority was being given to flying the Space Shuttle’s final mission, STS-135, which was added to the shuttle launch schedule by Congress in the 2010 NASA Authorization Act, but for which funding was neither requested nor appropriated. “STS-135 is on my schedule,” responded Gen. Bolden. He said that unless dramatic changes are made to the FY2011 budget by Congress, it will be launched on June 28, 2011. Bolden said he remains hopeful that “Congress will come to an agreement [on the budget] that won’t cripple NASA and the rest of the nation.”

This funding uncertainty also prevented Gen. Bolden from providing a timetable for future human exploration missions. He said that if the budget were reduced or approved too close to the end of the fiscal year “all bets are off.” He added that NASA would announce plans for the HLLV and MCPV during the summer, but admitted that the

deadline in the 2010 NASA Authorization Act to have the vehicles flying by 2016 was made “very difficult” with only the authorized budget figures. While not saying that it could not be done, NASA and industry “together as a team,” would be “challenged no matter how much money” Congress provides.

Representative Marcia Fudge (D–OH), in turn, while pleased with the initiatives directed in the FY2012 request to the NASA Glenn Research Center in her district, expressed concern for an amendment to the House-passed continuing resolution (CR) for the rest of FY2011 (H.R. 1), which would reduce Cross-Agency Support by \$300 million, a cut of \$8 million in management funds for Glenn. Gen. Bolden said that the amendment would equal “the funds to run two NASA centers,” but reminded the Committee that the Senate had yet to approve the measure.

Representative Mo Brooks (R-AL) asked Bolden whether NASA or the White House had explained to Congress what harm would be caused by approving this \$300 million reduction to fund a community policing program. Gen. Bolden said that he did not know what the White House communicated on that point, but would provide an answer for the record on what NASA might have communicated. Bolden insisted that “the Senate will still have a say,” but ventured that, in addition to the “day to day” operations of two centers, another effect would be the loss of about 4,000 contractor jobs. Representative Brooks said he was not aware of “any effort to communicate any kind of adverse impact” from that specific cutback. He asserted that Republicans had tried to protect the NASA budget in the face of the Democrats, who “tried to undermine the NASA budget.” [Note: Representative Brooks neglected to mention that the total \$601 million reduction to the NASA budget in H.R. 1 began when the Republican-led House Appropriations Committee cut \$303 million in the version of the bill they sent to floor; the amendment by Representative Anthony Weiner (D-NY) discussed above, adopted 228-203, cut another \$298 million.]

Earth Sciences and Climate Change

Responding to a question from Representative Donna Edwards (D-MD) over NASA’s Earth Sciences budget request, which would be flat instead of growing as projected last year, Bolden explained that the fiscal situation has changed dramatically in the last several months, even between the time it took to get the Authorization Act written and signed. Representative Edwards represents NASA’s Goddard Space Flight Center where many of the earth science programs are managed. Gen. Bolden said that NASA had begun the process to “deal with fiscal reality” in the budget request and that some of the effects are felt in Earth Sciences. Several missions – such as Climate Absolute Radiance and Refractivity Observatory ([CLARREO](#)) – went back to their original planned launch dates after 2020. He said that “things have really changed,” and that for some of these missions, they had “no choice,” but to return them to the original schedule as there is no money available to launch them earlier as was expected last year.

Gen. Bolden went on to talk about the need to upgrade Earth observation systems, including weather capabilities, emphasizing the need to ensure that there are no gaps in

critical systems, particularly with the cancellation of the National Polar-orbiting Operational Environmental Satellite System (NPOESS) [last year](#). “We are in dire straits when it comes to the weather,” he said. Representative Rohrabacher expressed strong sentiments about NPOESS, a program that began in 1994 and aimed to merge the weather satellite capabilities of the Department of Defense (DOD) and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). The tri-agency (DOD, NOAA, NASA) program encountered significant delays and cost growth. Had NPOESS been on time and on budget, commented Representative Rohrabacher, “we’d have all the money we want.” He turned to Gen. Bolden and said, “your most important job, General, is that it never happens again and that we never waste billions of dollars in managing programs as that program was managed.”

Gen. Bolden also clarified that Earth Sciences is “the study of our Earth,” and not necessarily linked to climate change research, which many Republicans ardently oppose. “I don’t do global warming; I do Earth science,” he reiterated. The comment was well received by Chairman Hall, who was quick to respond: “I don’t do global warming either. We [sure are] on the same side there.” [Note: Gen. Bolden’s comment skirted the fact that many of NASA’s Earth Science missions do, in fact, contribute data that aid in the understanding of climate change and monitor changes in Earth’s climate system.]