On March 7, 2012, NASA Administrator Charlie Bolden appeared before two different committees to discuss NASA’s FY2013 budget request. The morning hearing was before the Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee. The afternoon hearing was before the House Science, Space and Technology Committee. This SpacePolicyOnline.com summary of the consecutive hearings was published on March 7 under the title “Congress Still Concerned About SLS Versus Commercial Crew.”

NASA Administrator Charlie Bolden faced off against two congressional committees today, one in the Senate and one in the House. A common theme was the Obama Administration's FY2013 budget request for the future of the human spaceflight program and what many see as a competition between commercial crew services to the International Space Station (ISS) and a NASA-developed system to take astronauts further into the solar system.

Both the Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee and the House Science, Space and Technology Committee hearings raised questions about other priorities in the NASA budget request -- especially funding for robotic Mars exploration -- but the focus was firmly on commercial crew versus the Space Launch System (SLS) and Multi-Purpose Crew Vehicle (MPCV) space capsule (called Orion) Congress directed NASA to build in the 2010 NASA authorization act.

Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison (R-TX) accused the Obama Administration of blatantly taking money from SLS/Orion for the commercial crew program. In an unusually testy public exchange, Bolden insisted to Senator Hutchison that no one in the room was more passionate about SLS/Orion than himself. His confidence that SLS/Orion is on the right track may account for his seeming lack of passion for it, he suggested.

NASA's decision to use Space Act Agreements (SAAs) instead of traditional procurement methods under the Federal Acquisition Regulations (FARs) also was debated. Bolden assured both committees that it had sufficient insight under the SAAs to know if companies planning to compete for commercial crew opportunities would meet NASA's requirements.

The Administration's decision to cut funding for NASA's planetary science program, especially the decision to not participate in what was planned as NASA-European Space Agency joint missions to Mars in 2016 and 2018 -- was also mentioned. While clearly a concern of these two authorization committees, the future of the human spaceflight program obviously was center stage.