

Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON SCIENCE, SPACE, AND TECHNOLOGY

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May 21, 2021

Mr. Bill Nelson
Administrator
National Aeronautics and Space Administration
300 E. Street, SW
Washington, D.C., 20546

Dear Administrator Nelson:

On May 12, 2021, NASA issued a press release announcing that the next Planetary Science New Frontiers Program Announcement of Opportunity (AO) will be delayed from 2022 to the fall of 2024.¹ As you know, the New Frontiers program is one of the primary means of carrying out exploration of the solar system, producing the New Horizon's mission to Pluto, the Juno mission to Jupiter, the OSIRIS-Rex asteroid return mission, and the future Dragonfly mission to Saturn's moon Titan. NASA indicated that the "delays are driven by other missions being in peak development and COVID-related challenges in the broader Planetary Science Division portfolio." The Communist Chinese Party released images yesterday from its Mars rover. China is only the second nation, behind the U.S., to accomplish such a feat. China's accomplishment and the Biden Administration's retreat from planetary science exploration present a stark contrast today.

NASA's preliminary budget request for FY2022 includes little information, but it does propose a \$300 million increase for Earth Science.² This is a 15 percent increase over FY21 appropriated levels and a 22.45 percent increase over the notional FY22 request from the Trump Administration. At the same time, the Administration requested a top-line budget for NASA of \$24.7 billion, a \$1.5 billion (6.3 percent) increase over the FY21 appropriated level, but a decrease of \$2.45 billion (9 percent) from the Trump Administration's planned budget for FY22. With the significant increase proposed for Earth Science, and the significant decrease from the previously proposed budget request for NASA, we are concerned that a significant reprioritization within NASA will undermine planetary science exploration. Delays and cuts to planetary science exploration could have particularly dire impacts on U.S. leadership in space as China seeks to expand its planetary science program, pursue international partnerships to expand its influence, and justify the Communist Party's control over the Chinese people through scientific accomplishments.

¹ <https://www.nasa.gov/feature/nasa-moves-new-frontiers-5-call-to-no-earlier-than-2024>

² https://www.nasa.gov/sites/default/files/atoms/files/nasa_chapter_fy_2022_discretionary_request.pdf

In order to better understand the cause of this delay, and its potential impact, please provide the following information:

NASA's press release indicated that Planetary Science New Frontiers delays "...are driven by other missions being in peak development and COVID-related challenges in the broader Planetary Science Division portfolio."

1. What specific missions are in "peak development," as mentioned in NASA's May 12, 2021 press release?
 - a. Have any of these missions experienced cost or schedule growth that either require notification to Congress pursuant to 51 U.S.C. Sec. 30104, or experienced cost growth below the required thresholds that require reporting pursuant to the aforementioned provision?
2. Why would planned mission development cycles impact future missions, particularly when the Planetary Science mission directorate was appropriated \$43.4 million above what was requested in FY21?
3. What specific COVID-related challenges caused this delay?
 - a. What were the specific cost and schedule impacts to NASA programs, projects, and activities that influenced this decision?
4. How did NASA use additional funding appropriated in FY21 for COVID-related impacts to mitigate these impacts?
5. What specific COVID-related challenges does NASA face when issuing Announcements of Opportunities for future missions?

We look forward to working with you to ensure that the U.S. remains a world leader in planetary science and space exploration. Maintaining a balanced and sustainable portfolio of programs at NASA could insulate specific programs from wild swings in funding that complicate planning and operations. We know you recognize the importance of balancing NASA's science activities. The NASA Authorization Act of 2017, on which we collaborated together to enact, stated in section 501 that, "a balanced and adequately funded set of activities, consisting of research and analysis grant programs, technology development, suborbital research activities, and small, medium, and large space missions, contributes to a robust and productive science program and serves as a catalyst for innovation and discovery."

Thank you for your attention to this inquiry. Please provide responses by June 8, 2021. If you have any questions, please contact Tom Hammond from the Committee staff.

Sincerely,



Frank Lucas
Ranking Member



Brian Babin
Ranking Member
Space and Aeronautics
Subcommittee

CC: Rep. Eddie Bernice Johnson
Chairwoman
Rep. Don Beyer
Chairman
Space and Aeronautics
Subcommittee