



COMMITTEE ON
SCIENCE, SPACE, & TECHNOLOGY
Lamar Smith, Chairman

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Statement from Brian Babin (R-Texas)

An Update on NASA Exploration Systems Development

Chairman Babin: Exploration means expanding our reach as humans, as a civilization and as a country. The ability of our nation to explore space is a strategic imperative. Our ability to carry out this critical strategic endeavor will rely on a few key capabilities.

We must launch the Space Launch System (SLS) in order to push beyond low Earth orbit. We must finish developing the Orion capsule in order to operate in deep space. And we must upgrade our ground infrastructure to support a rejuvenated and expanded exploration agenda.

NASA's long-term goal, as laid out in the 2017 NASA Transition Authorization Act, is to extend human presence throughout the Solar System. The Space Launch System and Orion are the strategic capabilities that will enable humans and robots to accomplish this goal.

SLS and Orion will enable U.S. astronauts to return to the moon for the first time since Gene Cernan left his daughter's name in the lunar regolith in 1972. As Vice President Pence said in the inaugural meeting of the reestablished National Space Council, "We will return American astronauts to the moon, not only to leave behind footprints and flags, but to build the foundation we need to send Americans to Mars and beyond."

SLS and Orion are the tip of the spear that will lead that return. The commercial sector can contribute by supplying necessary services and providing augmenting capabilities, but SLS and Orion are irreplaceable strategic assets that are necessary for missions to the moon, Mars and beyond.

One of the first major laws that President Trump signed was the NASA Transition Authorization Act of 2017. The bill, which originated with this committee, directed NASA to stay the course with SLS and Orion. It also reaffirmed congressional and presidential direction for NASA to utilize a "stepping stone approach" to exploration, which allows for a return to the moon. I wholeheartedly support the administration's call to return to the moon. This committee has received testimony time and again that the moon is the appropriate next destination for our space program. Returning to the moon does not have to mean delaying a mission to Mars. On the contrary, it is a logical step that enables exploration of the red planet and beyond.

While I am excited by the promise of how strategic assets like SLS and Orion will enable America to return to the moon, this committee has a responsibility to conduct oversight to ensure these programs are successful.

All three exploration system elements — SLS, Orion and Ground Systems — have experienced delays and overruns. This year has certainly challenged the program. Last spring, Michoud was hit by a tornado. In August, Texas and Florida were hit by hurricanes. A couple years ago the Michoud's Vertical Assembly Facility foundation was not reinforced, requiring a rebuild. This year, complications with friction stir weld pins at Michoud resulted in poor welds on the core stage. All this adds up.

It appears as though the new issues with tornados, hurricanes and welding will cost roughly a year of delay. Depending on whether the Europeans deliver the service module on time for integration on Orion, the delay may be greater.

Congress needs to understand where the program is today. What cost, schedule and performance deliverables can the agency commit to? What is the plan going forward? How will NASA manage future issues to ensure long-term program sustainability?

We aren't out of the woods yet on this program, but we can see the edge of the forest. Significant progress has been made. We are bending metal, writing software code and integrating hardware. Given a program of this magnitude, this is no small feat — particularly given the challenges the program faced under the last administration.

In order to meet our nation's space exploration goals, it will take focus, discipline and continuity of effort going forward. The administration and Congress must not only provide leadership and direction, but we also have to appropriately fund and oversee the program. Similarly, NASA and the contractors have to execute. Failure to do so could have dire consequences for the program, and there will be no one else to blame. The administration has demonstrated its renewed support. Congress consistently funds the program at healthy levels. It is time for NASA and the contractors to deliver.

I am thankful that our witnesses are here today to help us better understand where we are at with the program, and how we plan to move forward. I look forward to your testimony.

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