

OPENING STATEMENT

The Honorable Steven M. Palazzo (R-MS), Chairman

Subcommittee on Space and Aeronautics

Committee on Science, Space, and Technology

A Review of NASA's Exploration Program in Transition: Issues for Congress and Industry

Wednesday, March 30, 2011

Good morning. I'd like to welcome everyone to today's subcommittee hearing to review the transition of NASA's Exploration programs as directed in last year's Authorization Act. We have a distinguished panel of witnesses who will give us the status of the capabilities that have been developed by the Constellation program, as well as the current status of the transition activities that have taken place over the past year, and the effect those changes are having on the aerospace workforce and industrial base.

I am happy that we are joined today by the Chairman of the Science, Space, and Technology Committee, Ralph Hall. I will keep my remarks brief so I can yield my remaining time to Chairman Hall for his opening statement.

During the previous three reauthorization cycles – including last year's bill - Congress has been clear about its desire to develop a government-owned launch system capable of taking astronauts to low Earth orbit and beyond. This Administration, on the other hand, has advocated an approach where NASA would rely exclusively on commercial companies to provide transportation to low Earth orbit. And while a government-owned capability to extend deeper in space is a 'nice-to-have', the Administration seems to reason there is no rush to develop such a system, arguing that we aren't prepared – nor can we afford – to undertake a deep space mission in this decade. I disagree, and I think the law is clear; Congress expects NASA to develop a Space Launch System and Multi Purpose Crew Vehicle in time to serve as a back-up to the commercial companies, who will likely encounter delays. And just as importantly, by building a follow-on system now, NASA will provide continuity for the skilled engineers and technicians who underpin our nation's space capabilities. To not engage them would ensure a quick withering-away of this skill base, and it would take years, and billions of dollars to revive that capability. As Mr. Maser makes clear in his testimony; the nation's aerospace workforce and industrial base is a Perishable National Asset that can disappear.

Many of my constituents have been working on the Constellation program at the Stennis Space Center for a number of years. The J-2X upper stage rocket engine should be completed in May, and is scheduled for testing at Stennis in June or July. The J-2X is one of many advanced capabilities developed over the past few years that could be applied directly toward a heavy-lift Space Launch System. In the very tight fiscal environment we are in, NASA must make maximum use of every hard-won capability at its disposal. The decisions that NASA has made, and will make over the next few months could have profound effects on the future of the aerospace workforce and industrial base. These are important decisions affecting thousands of people and hundreds of millions of dollars of investment in national capabilities, and it is vital that NASA proceed with care, but not delay. I look forward to the testimony of our witnesses.

I now yield my time to the Chairman of the Science, Space, and Technology Committee – Ralph Hall – for his opening statement.