

Rep. Alan Mollohan (D-WV) at Space Transportation Association Breakfast

Rep. Alan Mollohan (D-WV), outgoing chairman of the House Appropriations Committee's Commerce-Justice-Science subcommittee, which funds NASA, told a Space Transportation Association (STA) audience on November 18, 2010 that NASA would face difficult challenges if it must operate under a Continuing Resolution (CR) for an extended period of time. Noting that the first question he is asked these days is whether Congress will pass an omnibus appropriations bill for FY2011 covering all federal agencies or only another CR, he said "I don't know." The current CR, which has been funding the government since the beginning of FY2011 on October 1, 2010, expires on December 3. Congress must do something – pass another CR or an omnibus appropriations bill – to keep the government operating after that date.

Rep. Mollohan is leaving Congress after 28 years of service. He lost his primary race in the spring. He has represented the 1st district of West Virginia since 1983 when he was elected to succeed his father.

Under a CR, agencies are not supposed to start new programs meaning that the new direction laid out in the 2010 NASA Authorization Act would be delayed, Mollohan pointed out. He added that the additional funds requested by President Obama for NASA's earth science program also would be at risk. The issue is not the total amount of money that would be available for the agency, he said, but how it would be spent.

NASA programs take a long time to reach fruition, he noted, wryly adding that "if you want instant gratification, you've come to the wrong place" at NASA. He rued the fact that he will not be in Congress to see the fruits of many of the NASA programs he supports, but is happy to see construction of the International Space Station (ISS) completed. The program began shortly after he took office, and though it cost "an order of magnitude more than planned," has great promise as a scientific laboratory in his opinion.

He listed two programs as highlights of his congressional career with regard to NASA: the Earth Observing System (EOS) and the Hubble Space Telescope, but argued that NASA still is trying to do too much with too little. He feels launch vehicles are too expensive and the United States is too dependent on Russian rockets, worries that the country is relying on "design life plus" lifetimes for satellites such as Landsat 5, and believes although that the space shuttle and ISS are great, it is time for the U.S. space program to focus on a new vision and "break out of low Earth orbit." He stressed that "Congress wants an aggressive human spaceflight program" as evidenced by the 2010 NASA Authorization Act.

Some Republicans are calling for federal agency budgets to be cut back to their FY2008 levels. In response to a question about how NASA advocates can successfully counter that effort, Rep. Mollohan said there were "lots of arguments" to be made for not cutting NASA. More generally, he said the budget cannot be balanced by cutting the

discretionary part of the federal budget, which includes NASA. He does feel that at this time of continuing indecision at NASA, it is difficult for appropriators to decide how to allocate resources to the agency's programs, adding that it would be "nice" if NASA was more efficient and "less Machiavellian."

He also expressed surprise that Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) has announced that he now opposes earmarks, which McConnell supported in the past. Rep. Mollohan said this was a political issue and is skeptical that any such ban on earmarks would be permanent. However, he cautioned that while there always are some anti-government Members of Congress, today there is a "critical mass" of them. He then made a stirring defense of the U.S. Constitution and what the founders intended for the role of government in the United States.

