



SpacePolicyOnline.Com

Congressional Hearing Notes
An Overview of the Administration's Federal Research and Development
Budget Request for Fiscal Year 2013
House Science, Space and Technology Committee
February 17, 2012

The House Science, Space and Technology Committee held a hearing with the President's Science Adviser and Director of the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, John Holdren, on February 17, 2012 to discuss the President's FY2013 budget request for research and development. These SpacePolicyOnline.com meeting notes cover primarily those aspects of the hearing that relate to NASA and NOAA space programs and were originally published on SpacePolicyOnline.com on February 19, 2012 under the title. "House Committee Members Argue Against Cuts to Mars Exploration, Weather Satellites." Links to hearing statements and the committee's webcast are included at the end.

Cutting federal spending may be on the top of Washington's priority list, but not if it impacts NASA's Mars and human exploration programs or NOAA's weather satellites if House science committee members have their way.

At a House Science, Space and Technology Committee hearing on Friday, Chairman Ralph Hall (R-TX) sharply criticized the President's FY2013 budget request for research and development (R&D) for singling NASA out for "unequal treatment." Ranking member Eddie Bernice Johnson (D-TX) joined him in complaining about cuts to the robotic Mars exploration program while other members rued the level of funding for NOAA's Joint Polar Satellite System (JPSS).

The topic of the hearing was the FY2013 budget request for R&D. John Holdren, President Obama's science adviser and Director of the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP), was the only witness. He defended the request which, he said, increases non-defense R&D by five percent over the FY2012 level despite austere budget times.

Committee Chairman Hall, however, criticized that request because it proposes increases for all the agencies within the committee's jurisdiction except NASA. He is particularly concerned about the proposed reductions in NASA's robotic Mars exploration program and inadequate funding for the Space Launch System (SLS), the

new “heavy lift” rocket that NASA is building at congressional direction in the 2010 NASA Authorization Act out into the solar system.

Hall stressed that in that Act, Congress directed that the SLS and the Orion Multi-Purpose Crew Vehicle be available to serve as a backup to commercial crew to transport astronauts to the International Space Station (ISS). Under NASA’s proposed schedule, however, SLS/Orion system will not be ready for its first crewed flight until 2021, a year after ISS operations are currently scheduled to be discontinued. Holdren deflected a question from Rep. Lamar Smith (R-TX) about whether the SLS program would remain on its current schedule by saying he “had a cloudy crystal ball” when trying to predict the progress of complex technological projects. He did, however, assure the congressman that he did not know of any plans to delay it.

Hall asked Holdren about the decision to use Space Act Agreements for developing commercial crew capabilities and the fact that they do not allow NASA to require companies to meet safety standards. Holdren demurred, saying that he did not know the details, but said that as far as he knows NASA retains responsibility for the safety of its astronauts and “if there is a problem in the agreements that would jeopardize that, I am sure we will fix it.”

Hall also inquired how Holdren could say that the budget represents an “integrated strategy” for Mars exploration “that ensures the next steps for the robotic Mars exploration program,” since there is no next mission to Mars in the budget. Holdren countered that even though the NASA budget cannot support two planned Mars missions with Europe in 2016 and 2018, “we retain the most vigorous and forward leaning program ... in the world” with a rover (Opportunity) already on the surface of Mars and another one (Curiosity) on its way, two spacecraft (Mars Odyssey and Mars Reconnaissance Orbiter) already in orbit and another scheduled for launch next year (MAVEN), “and additional missions going forward.” He insisted that “We are in no way retreating from our commitment to have a vigorous program of Mars exploration including laying the groundwork for human exploration.”

Ranking member Eddie Bernice Johnson (D-TX) joined Hall in criticizing cuts to the Mars planetary science program. She said that the decision could create the perception that the United States is an unreliable partner at a time when international cooperation is more important than ever. Not everyone on the committee agreed with that sentiment, however. Rep. Zoe Lofgren (D-CA) later said that she considered the NASA request to be “prudent” and suggested that the Europeans may not be able to afford their Mars plans either considering the economic circumstances in Europe.

In general, Holdren defended the request for NASA, asserting it “honors the priorities” of the 2010 NASA Authorization Act, including support for development of SLS and Orion, operations of the ISS through at least 2020, commercial crew, launching the James Webb Space Telescope (JWST) in 2018, “an integrated strategy” for the robotic Mars exploration program that supports both science and human exploration goals, a balanced set of Earth and space science missions, a “dynamic” space technology program, and a “strong aeronautics research effort.”

NOAA's satellite programs also were debated during the hearing. Johnson praised the proposed increase for NOAA's new geostationary weather satellite program, GOES-R, but expressed concern about "the small cut" to NOAA's new polar-orbiting system, the Joint Polar Satellite System (JPSS). She referred to JPSS as a "long-troubled" effort, although it was initiated only in FY2011. However, it is NOAA's successor to a long-troubled program -- the tri-agency National Polar-orbiting Operational Environmental Satellite System (NPOESS) – that was terminated by the Obama Administration in the FY2011 budget after 16 years of delays and overruns. JPSS, however, did not receive its requested funding level in FY2011 or FY2012, and NOAA is [warning](#) that there likely will be a gap in data several years from now when existing satellites cease functioning, but the first JPSS is not yet operational.

Holdren said NOAA's weather satellites are "crucial" and blamed the potential gap on the previous Administration and Congress itself. Holdren said "we've been threatened for some time with a gap we inherited," perhaps suggesting that the Bush Administration should have cancelled NPOESS instead of leaving it for President Obama. "We're doing everything possible to ... minimize that gap even if we don't now have the capability to avoid it all together," he asserted. He pointed to the less-than-requested funding JPSS received for the previous two years and said in the FY2013 budget they are "trying to make up for it." In fact, he blamed the need to fund weather satellites for why the NOAA R&D budget overall would decline in FY2013. "Nobody wanted to reduce ... the R&D portfolio" at NOAA, "but we absolutely have to minimize the gap," he said.

Rep. Daniel Lipinski (D-IL) complained about cuts to NOAA's National Weather Service (NWS), but Holdren insisted that the most important thing for the NWS is getting basic data about what the atmosphere is doing. If money cannot be found to pay for the satellites that provide that data, he said, then "all the money in the world poured into the Weather Service won't make up for the deficit."

The hearing was broadly on the R&D budget request and one of the other topics that arose was interaction with China. Two committee members – Rep. Dana Rohrabacher (R-CA) and Chip Cravaack (R-MN) grilled Holdren on why the United States would want to share any technology with China as Rohrabacher said Vice President Joe Biden suggested earlier in the week during a visit by China's Vice President Xi Jinping. Holdren insisted that the Administration does not want to share any technologies with China that are harmful to U.S. interests, but there are some where it is in our own best interest to share. He cited nuclear reactor safety, avoiding theft of nuclear materials from nuclear facilities, influenza, and reducing emissions of pollutants as examples.

- [Hearing Charter](#)
- [Opening Statement by Chairman Ralph Hall](#) (R-TX)
- [Opening Statement by Ranking Member Eddie Bernice Johnson](#) (D-TX)
- [Prepared Statement by Dr. John Holdren](#)
- [Webcast](#)