

House Science Committee discusses NASA FY 2019 budget and project plans

March 13, 2018

On March 7, the House Science, Space, and Technology Subcommittee on Space held a hearing on the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) budget for fiscal year (FY) 2019. Under the FY 2019 President's Budget Request, NASA would receive a total of \$19.9 billion in funding, a 1.2 percent increase from the FY 2017 enacted funding level. The budget request proposes shifting the agency's existing resources to focus on deep space exploration activities, starting with another human mission to the Moon in 2023, with the intent of setting the stage for future human missions to Mars. It also proposes to eliminate the Office of Education in order to redirect its funding, which was appropriated at \$100 million in FY 2017, for deep space exploration.

As part of the FY 2019 budget request, NASA is proposing to pursue a bold new lunar exploration program through an Exploration Campaign funded at \$10.5 billion in FY 2019 and a total of \$52 billion over five years. NASA's Acting Director Robert Lightfoot explained to the subcommittee that long-term U.S. deep space exploration preeminence depends on the nation's near future dominance of cislunar space, or the space between the Earth and the Moon. The agency intends to achieve this goal by developing a Lunar Orbital Platform-Gateway in the early 2020's. Furthermore, to offset the costs of the new exploration initiatives, the FY 2019 budget includes plans to encourage public-private partnerships and to transition to the use of commercial capabilities, particularly for research and technology in low Earth orbit (LEO). Acting Director Lightfoot indicated that the LEO commercial sector would be able to sustain the International Space Station (ISS) in 2025, when the Administration intends to end direct federal government support. In response to members of the subcommittee apparently skeptical of the ISS private sector handoff, Acting Director Lightfoot noted the proven commercial viability of LEO remote sensing and earth observational technologies.

The President's FY 2019 budget request would provide \$5.8 billion for NASA's Science program, an increase of \$133 million from FY 2017. Within this amount, the Earth Science sub-directorate would receive \$1.8 billion, a \$124 million or 6.5 percent decrease from FY 2017 funding levels. Acting Director Lightfoot noted in his testimony that two missions recommended by the 2017-2027 Earth Science Decadal Survey will be launching in 2018 to expand the long-term collection of key Earth observations. These include the Gravity Recovery and Climate Experiment (GRACE) Follow-on and the Ice, Cloud and land Elevation Satellite-2 (ICESat-2) missions. He also stated that although the FY 2019 budget would no longer support Education programs, "a common vision, mission, and focus areas will drive NASA's future endeavors in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) and public engagement."

Members of the subcommittee applauded Mr. Lightfoot's lifelong career at NASA, and expressed their frustration over the Senate's delay in confirming Representative James Bridenstine as NASA Administrator. Just five days after the hearing, Acting Director Lightfoot announced his retirement from the agency to occur on April 30, even as the Senate has not yet confirmed an administrator nor has the President nominated a deputy administrator for the agency.

Sources: American Institute of Physics, National Aeronautics and Space Administration, New York Times
