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The House Subcommittee on Space held a hearing on May 21, 2013 on next steps in human space exploration. The primary goal of the hearing was to evaluate whether a human mission to the moon or to a near-earth asteroid would better prepare NASA to send humans to Mars and beyond.

In their opening remarks, representatives from both parties expressed support for continued human space exploration. Additionally, Subcommittee Chairman Steven Palazzo (R-MS) and Full Committee Ranking Member Eddie Bernice Johnson (D-TX) expressed frustration at the barriers faced by NASA in developing its human exploration program, including a lack of clear directives and significant budget cuts.

Witnesses called to testify took opposing positions on the issue. Dr. Louis Friedman, co-lead of the Keck Institute for Space Studies Asteroid Retrieval Mission Study argued that suitable asteroids have already been identified and that it would be feasible to launch an asteroid-focused mission within the next five years. In the proposed mission, a robotic spacecraft would capture an asteroid and redirect it into orbit just beyond the moon where astronauts could visit it. In contrast, Dr. Paul Spudis, Senior Staff Scientist at the Lunar and Planetary Institute, reasoned that a lunar destination was preferable because the moon is the most accessible body in space, is scientifically interesting, and contains resources that would be useful to continued space exploration. “By developing the resources of the Moon,” Spudis explained, “[w]e become capability-unlimited, permitting the development of new, and as yet undreamed of capacities.”

Opening statements, witness testimonies and an archived webcast of the hearing can be found on the committee’s web site.
