

Testimony of Representative Pete Olson (TX-22) to the Budget Committee

March 18, 2009, CHB 210, 3:00 pm

Chairman Spratt, Ranking Member Ryan, members of the Budget Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. I wanted to take this opportunity to discuss with you a significant, and highly visible national program that is at a critical crossroads for lack of sufficient resources. America's human spaceflight program.

Last year NASA celebrated its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. For half a century this agency has been leading the world in human space exploration, aeronautics, space science and climate research. I believe the record is quite clear. The investments we have made in America's space agency over the last fifty years have greatly enhanced the perception around the world that the United States is the world leader in the benevolent uses of science and technology, while providing high-quality jobs, delivering cutting edge research, amazing new technologies, and inspiring generations of Americans – and for that matter, billions of people worldwide – all for less than one percent of our federal budget. In fact, even with this year's welcome increase to \$18.7 billion, NASA's entire budget amounts to only about one-half-of-one-percent of the total!

I understand that there is little room for pet programs in our economic environment. I want to impress upon you that this is not one. My concern however is this budget does not address the most critical issue facing the Agency. The space shuttle is scheduled to be retired in about 18 months! The program to develop our future launch capability, Constellation, is not slated to be operational until 2015 at the earliest. This means that for at least 5 years, the United States will not have independent access to space, particularly to the International Space Station, which has been paid for primarily by American taxpayers at a cost of around \$100 billion. For those five years, our only access to space, and to the ISS, will be through the purchase of seats from Russia aboard their Soyuz spacecraft. The uncertainties in global politics do not allow me to feel comfortable in ceding that capability to another country.

This gap in our ability to independently access the International Space Station is the most critical issue, but make no mistake, the ramifications are not limited to the space community; they are of global significance. It is increasingly important for the United States to strengthen our bonds with our friends and allies. Space exploration is one of the most visible activities we do on the world stage, and one of the areas where other countries are eager to join with us.

The President's preliminary budget request appears to be consistent with the objectives spelled out in the NASA Authorization Act of 2008 and I'm pleased that the goal of returning humans to the Moon by 2020 is a key feature, as are efforts to stimulate the private-sector to develop and demonstrate commercial crew and cargo delivery services to the International Space Station. The details, however, have not been made clear. But even though I am heartened by the FY10 request, I do find it troubling that the President's outyear projections indicate flat or slightly reduced funding levels for NASA. The challenges confronting the agency, including its human spaceflight program, will be amplified if these projections come to pass.

Since its creation, NASA has produced many astonishing scientific and technical successes. But it's important to remember that NASA is first and foremost a research and development agency whose goal is to undertake very risky and technologically challenging missions. Unlike operational agencies that deliver goods and services at a scale commensurate with its resources, when confronted with inadequate budgets, NASA has no option but to slow the pace of its missions and programs. Too few resources, and the viability of this multi-mission agency may be jeopardized.

The human spaceflight program has, in recent years, faced significant challenges, chief among them replacing the aging Shuttle. But it's not simply a matter of the cost going forward; NASA's human spaceflight program, including Shuttle, has had to absorb huge, unanticipated costs. For instance, the cost arising out of the Shuttle Columbia tragedy was \$2.7 billion, for which it has never been covered by subsequent appropriations. Instead, those costs came out of existing programs.

In addition, human spaceflight has been stressed since the rollout of the Constellation system in early 2004. Neither the Administration nor Congress have provided the resources that were assumed when the program was made public, yet the schedule of retiring the Shuttle and the first flight of its successor are still fairly much the same.

NASA has ten research centers located across the US. The skilled workforce that NASA depends on for its human spaceflight program is at risk if we don't give them the resources to help close the five year gap. Simply put, once they leave NASA, they won't return. By funding Constellation at a higher level, the ability to keep this workforce in place increases by funding more test flights and setting a quicker pace in converting existing facilities as just two examples.

This Congress has debated the necessity and virtue of having projects ready to go. Please consider funding this critical national program at the levels that allow them to achieve their worthwhile goals.