

Return-To-Moon Program Gets Small Boost

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September 16, 2009

WASHINGTON (AP) — NASA's weakened return-to-the-moon program got a lift Tuesday on Capitol Hill.

The head of a special expert panel conceded to Congress that the moon program could work if given enough money. That would mean another \$3 billion a year for the program proposed by President George W. Bush.

The plan has been under question because of that panel's dim look at NASA's future and concerns about support from the Obama administration. The panel issued its preliminary summary last week, concluding that there is not enough money to explore space in the current budget, including the moon plan.

"With the resources available, the program I think is fatally flawed," testified Norman Augustine, head of the panel of experts appointed by President Barack Obama.

But congressmen from both parties, including the wife of an astronaut, came to the 5-year-old moon plan's defense. They even attacked the Augustine panel for referring to the plan in the past tense at one point.

"I don't see the logic in scrapping what the nation has spent years and billions of dollars to develop," said House Space Subcommittee chair Gabrielle Giffords, D-Arizona. Her husband is astronaut Mark Kelly, who will command a mission next year.

NASA said it has spent nearly \$8 billion already and plans to spend at least \$100 billion by 2020.

Giffords said there needs to be compelling reason to change the program. She pressed Augustine for a reason and said she was angry over the "glancing attention" the panel gave to the current program.

Augustine, retired chief executive officer of Lockheed Martin Corp., said the panel put the current program — with the extra funding — as one of several options for the president to choose among. The White House told the panel not to recommend one over the other, he said.

Having already spent lots of money is not reason alone to continue with the Bush plan, Augustine told The Associated Press after the hearing: "the sunken costs argument doesn't carry much weight with us."

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Published on Industrial Maintenance & Plant Operation (<http://www.impomag.com>)

After Augustine left, former NASA Administrator Michael Griffin — in an unusual move for a recent ex-space program chief — came to the defense of his pet project. Griffin agreed with the Augustine report in saying there was not enough money in the current budget to explore space and go anywhere new. Griffin noted that Presidents Obama, Bush and Bill Clinton all essentially cut NASA spending, with a drop of about 20 percent since 1993.

But Griffin in his written testimony defended the Bush moon program's technical design and emphasized that it should continue with the extra money. He said Congress should ask Obama and the Augustine commission "exactly why does the policy which we established in law — twice — need to be changed?"

"As I see it, the commission didn't find anything wrong with the current program, didn't find anything safer, more reliable, cheaper or faster," Griffin testified. "The roots are healthy. So why throw away four years and \$8 billion pulling the flowers? Let's apply some plant nutrient and watch them grow."

The Bush moon plan involves building two new Apollo-type rockets. The first and smaller one, Ares I, would carry people. The later and larger one, Ares V, would carry equipment. But the Augustine commission said it doesn't make much sense to build Ares I. Instead it preferred building only the Ares V and make it carry people and equipment if some version of the Bush plan is kept.

Last week, after an initial problem, the main rocket engine on Ares I passed a crucial test firing.

George Washington University space policy expert John Logsdon said the big test is what the Obama administration will decide once it examines the full Augustine commission report, which is due out later this month.

Source URL (retrieved on 01/30/2015 - 3:10pm):

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