



US must remain the global leader in exploring space (Rep. Pete Olson)

By: Rep Pete Olson, 05/04/2010

The president acknowledged recently his initial proposal to alter NASA's mission was dead on arrival in Congress. Unfortunately, his new vision isn't much better.

The president does not outline any path for the United States to get out of low earth orbit. A major component, the revised "Orion-lite" proposal, is little more than an opportunity to delay the inevitable layoffs of highly skilled workers across America and does not further our ability as a nation to explore the heavens or get us to the moon, Mars and beyond. It has also been reported as a mechanism to prevent the government from having to pay out costly Constellation cancellation contracts. This is not a strategy for success in human space flight. It turns the capsule designed to be our spacecraft for journeys to the moon into a lifeboat on the International Space Station.

It is often repeated that the \$6 billion increase over five years to NASA is a sign of commitment to human space flight, but that \$6 billion is not dedicated solely to human space flight. The president proposes to make a decision about a heavy lift rocket in 2015. It makes no sense to delay developing a heavy lift rocket now.

There is also the larger question of America's human space exploration vision. I am a proponent of returning to the moon. However, there are many people, including the president, who dismiss the notion of going back. If our sole purpose was to beat the Soviet Union, then indeed, that task has been accomplished. But the capability of going to the moon – which we had then and do not have now – must be rebuilt. Most significantly, for an administration committed to science, the important scientific benefits of study on the moon continue to astound. Just last week another study was released about water on the moon. The moon also remains an important steppingstone to get us to Mars and beyond.

Make no mistake, the government and the private sector roles are not mutually exclusive: They are parts to the equation. In fact throughout its existence, NASA has partnered successfully with industry to develop and complete the missions we have given the agency. Human space exploration is not solely a government one. The partnership with commercial entities is critical, and the efforts and work of commercial providers should be commended, both as partners in the Constellation program and for those

working to send cargo to the International Space Station and eventually humans into orbit.

When President Bush announced his Vision for Space Exploration in 2004, a major component was an increased participation by the commercial sector, first in cargo missions to the station, and eventually crewed missions. The 2005 and 2008 NASA Authorization Acts supported those goals. They were worthy goals then, and they are even more so today.

A balance between government and private enterprise is good and will continue. But understanding who takes the lead is critical, and that is what is being changed in this new proposal. Once private sector companies demonstrate they can safely meet the goals NASA has met, the private sector can take it over, and NASA can move on to the next challenge. This balance will keep our workforce motivated, enhance the private/civil space program partnership and, ultimately, be a better use of taxpayer dollars.

Just this week, the president announced a Florida Space Task Force to address the workforce needs going forward with his new proposal. While Florida plays an important role, they are not the only players in space exploration. Looking at Florida alone discounts the important mission control team at Johnson Space Center in Texas and its historic role in human space flight. And don't forget about the work done at Marshall Space Center in Alabama and countless other employees at contracting companies across America. Human space flight is not done solely in Florida.

The president has a voice in this process, but he does not have the final say. His budget was rolled out without congressional consultation, and I think it is fair to say the administration has learned that was not the ideal way to handle a program that means so much to so many.

Constellation is the program of record that has hit many milestones for success and can maintain America's dominance in human space flight. Several of my colleagues have joined with me in requesting that NASA find the means within their budget to continue Constellation. We in Congress should support that request by providing adequate resources for this program. America must remain the global leader on human space exploration. I remain committed to working with the president and my colleagues to make this happen.

Olson is the ranking member on the Space & Aeronautics Subcommittee that oversees NASA.