National Aeronautics and
Space Administration
Office of the Administrator
Washington, DC 20546-0001

October 29, 2003

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COMMITTEE ON SCIENCE

The Honorable Sherwood Boehlert
Chairman
Committee on Science
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Boehlert:

Thank you for your letter of October 21, 2003, regarding the Orbital Space Plane (OSP) program. I want to assure you that NASA will only proceed with OSP development consistent with the Administration program and Congressional support. Nothing is currently underway that would foreclose that condition.

Pursuant to the President's FY 2003 budget amendment, Congress provided initial funding for the OSP. Following the loss of *Columbia*, NASA took steps to enable acceleration of the OSP crew rescue capability to as early as 2008, followed by crew transfer capability. This is consistent with the statement in the Columbia Accident Investigation Board Report that "it is in the National interest to replace the Shuttle as soon as possible as the primary means for transporting humans to and from Earth orbit."

The resources in NASA's FY 2004 budget request are sufficient to allow NASA to position itself for the option to accelerate the OSP consistent with the observations of the Columbia Accident Investigation Board and desires previously expressed by some Members of Congress. At this time, NASA does not plan to select a team to develop and build an OSP before August 2004. In addition, the Administration is reviewing the overall plan for a crew transfer vehicle to the International Space Station (ISS) in light of overall U.S. space exploration goals, as part of the FY 2005 budget process. This planning horizon will permit ample time for Congress to fully consider this important endeavor.

NASA requires the entire OSP system--including vehicle, booster and supporting infrastructure--to be significantly safer than current space transportation systems. The program requires crew survivability during launch and reentry and emergency crew rescue capability from the ISS. These are significant steps toward the primary goal of achieving safer human space flight. We would be glad to provide an in-depth review of all OSP safety features that are planned, and under consideration, for the Committee.

The debate on the OSP program and its role as part of this overall plan will and should continue, and we are doing nothing that will foreclose that debate. I look forward to a continuing dialogue with you and the Committee on the OSP program.

Cordially,

Sean O'Keefe
Administrator