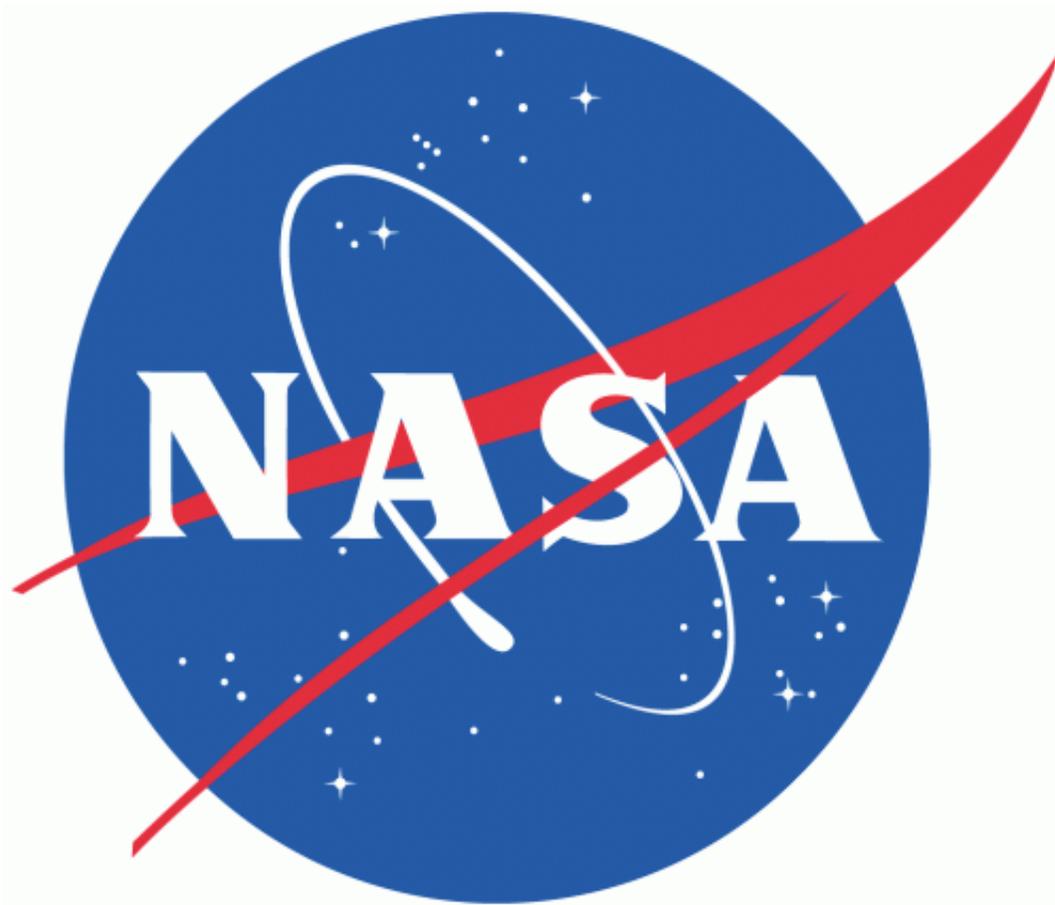


\$17.9 billion funding plan for NASA would boost planetary science

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The House Appropriations Committee recommended \$17.9 billion in funding for NASA on Thursday, significantly boosting planetary science

programs at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory and continuing operation of a flying telescope.

However, the [committee](#) also expressed doubts about the feasibility of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's proposed plan to capture an asteroid and tow it into orbit around the moon. Because of this, the committee said that [funding](#) for the so-called Asteroid Redirect Mission should be "carefully constrained."

The 2015 funding proposal is \$250 million more than the current year and \$435 million more than what was requested by the White House. A committee report says it allows NASA to continue development of its manned Orion spacecraft and heavy-lift Space Launch System, which could carry astronauts to Mars, or an asteroid.

It also commits "substantial resources" to the development of the so-called Commercial Crew Program, whereby private industry will help ferry astronauts to the International Space Station instead of using Russian Soyuz spacecraft.

But advocates of space exploration say the funding proposal is notable for a significant increase in support for planetary science.

The Orion, SLS and CCP programs account for \$4.2 billion of the appropriation, while another \$5.2 billion would be directed to science programs. Of that latter sum, \$1.45 billion is earmarked for planetary science - roughly \$170 million more than was requested by the president's budget office.

Committee members wrote that the president's funding request "imperiled" the continuation of critical research and development programs and needed to be increased.

Specifically, the committee said that no less than \$100 million should be spent on the next robotic mission to Mars - Mars Rover 2020 - which will be overseen by the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, which is based in La Canada Flintridge, Calif.

The spending proposal also designates \$181 million for the study of outer planets - more than half of which is to be spent on planning a robotic mission to study Jupiter's moon, Europa, or a similar project.

"It's nice to know that planetary science is back," said U.S. Representative Adam Schiff, D-Calif., a member of the Appropriations Committee. "This is really great news for JPL, but more broadly, great news for those who want America to maintain its preeminence in [planetary science](#)."

Schiff said there had been questions about whether there would be sufficient funding to keep the Mars Rover 2020 mission on schedule. This funding proposal answers that question, he said.

"This is an affirmative 'yes we can,'" he said. "Also, one of the top priorities ... is the mission to Europa and we now have a very substantial investment in that mission, something that JPL is intimately involved in," Schiff said.

In its report, the committee said it was also denying a NASA request to ground the Palmdale, Calif.-based Stratospheric Observatory for Infrared Astronomy, or SOFIA.

A heavily retrofitted 747 jumbo jet equipped with a 100-inch reflecting telescope, SOFIA operates out of the Armstrong Flight Research Center in the Mojave Desert and was slated for retirement.

In its report, committee members said the project produces "good

science" and had not been recommended for termination by NASA's science review boards. As such, they were recommending \$70 million to support the project's fixed costs, such as flight crews and maintenance.

"NASA shall continue seeking third-party partners whose additional funding support would restore SOFIA's budget to its full operational level," the committee said in its report.

The committee also expressed skepticism over the future of NASA's proposed Asteroid Redirect Mission, or ARM.

"The Congress still has outstanding questions and concerns about the ARM's costs and feasibility, as well as its strategic relevance and potential to generate external support from the public and international collaborators," the committee wrote.

"Because it remains unclear whether or when the Congress will make a long-term commitment to the ARM concept, the Committee believes that funding associated with the mission must be carefully constrained to prevent the occurrence of waste in the event that the ARM never receives final approval."

The spending bill must now go before the full House for approval, while the Senate is working on its own appropriations plan. The two proposals will then be reconciled sometime in the fall.

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