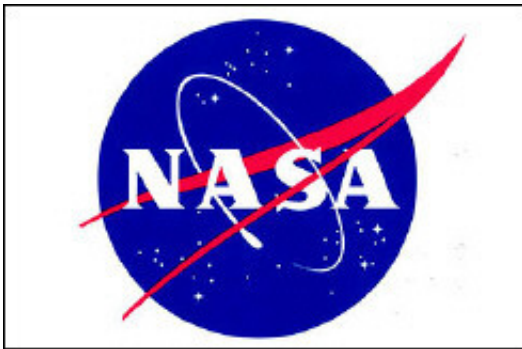


Obama administration to review NASA program, sources say

May 6 2009, By Mark K. Matthews and Robert Block



In a major turnaround, the Obama administration intends this week to order a review of the spacecraft program that NASA had hoped would one day replace the space shuttle, the Orlando Sentinel has learned.

According to several administration officials and industry insiders, the review would examine whether the Ares 1 rocket and Orion capsule are the best option to send astronauts into orbit by 2015. It could start as soon as this month and be finished by early fall, depending on how soon a panel of experts can be assembled.

The decision follows months of critical reports that have questioned whether Ares and Orion can overcome major financial and technical hurdles that threaten to delay a scheduled 2015 [launch](#) to the

[international space station](#) and even a return to the moon by 2020.

The outcome is critical for Kennedy Space Center, which is looking at as many as 10,000 job losses if the shuttle is retired in 2010. Right now, there's a five-year gap until the first Ares launch; proponents of different rocket designs say they could be launched sooner and save many jobs.

"I don't think they (White House officials) are completely convinced that the Constellation program, as designed, is the best way to go," said Vincent Sabathier, a space expert with the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a Washington-based think tank.

Sabathier said the White House had wanted to name a new administrator before announcing the study, but that the difficulty in finding a leader and the shuttle's looming retirement forced the administration's hand. "They want to mitigate the gap (between programs)," Sabathier said.

The announcement is planned to coincide with the Thursday release of President Barack Obama's \$18.7 billion spending plan for NASA. Agency and industry insiders said it should offer the first major clues to the new president's plans for the agency.

Obama has said little about NASA since taking office, other than noting this spring that the agency was afflicted by a "sense of drift." NASA has not had a permanent administrator since former chief Michael Griffin resigned in January.

Obama's budget summary released in February backed former President George W. Bush's plan to retire the shuttle in 2010 and return astronauts to the moon by 2020. But it did not specifically express support for Constellation, the program picked by Griffin in 2005 that uses the Ares I rocket and Orion capsule.

Ares' woes are well-known. It requires re-engineering to deal with violent shaking caused by vibrations in its solid-rocket first stage, and engineers are concerned the rocket could drift into its launch tower on takeoff. Its estimated costs through 2015 have risen from \$28 billion in 2006 to more than \$40 billion today.

Top NASA officials have been mum on the possibility of another study, but Griffin has lashed out at engineers and space advocates who criticize Constellation.

"I don't agree that there is a better approach for the money, but if there were, so what?" he said in a speech last month to the National Space Club. "Any proposed approach would need to be enormously better to justify wiping out four years' worth of solid progress."

But critics question whether there has been solid progress, pointing to constant revisions to the rocket's design because of technical and cost woes.

Recently, NASA announced that it would cut the Orion capsule's passenger capacity from six astronauts to four. Originally, Orion was to fly six astronauts to the space station and four to the moon. But because Ares I is less powerful and more expensive than originally planned, NASA has had to cut weight and costs from Orion.

The study that set NASA on its current course was ordered by Griffin in 2005. Called the Exploration Systems Architecture Study, or ESAS, it ruled against beefing up existing rockets used to launch military satellites in favor of building two new rockets -- Ares I, which would use the shuttle's solid rocket boosters as a first stage, and its heavy-lifting cousin, Ares V.

But many contractors and rocket companies complained that the study

was not fairly conducted and that the results were suspect.

"I think the people who are going to oversee this want to take another hard look at this," said Roger Launius, a curator at the National Air and Space Museum. "And there are people in some quarters, not all, who say that the study done in 2005 might have been shaded in such a way to lead you to the current architecture and (the administration) now wants to take a look at whether (Constellation) is the right answer."

Launius said a member of the Obama transition team told him months ago that the administration planned to "shine a bright light" on the Constellation program.

Frustrated with Ares I, a number of NASA engineers have worked in their spare time on other designs that they insist would be a better choice. One that is supported by many engineers and space advocates has been the Direct 2.0 Jupiter 120 rocket -- essentially, the shuttle's fuel tank and solid rocket boosters with a top-mounted capsule in place of the orbiter.

Despite the fact that the rocket is a NASA-originated design, Griffin and his top officials dismissed the project as a "hobby rocket."

Now Direct proponents are hopeful that their design will get a second look.

"It's about time," said Steve Metschan, the CEO of TeamVision Corp., a software-design company promoting Direct. "That is all we have been advocating from the very beginning, when it was clear that there were problems with the original study."

He is confident that the study will find the Direct design safer and more affordable -- and that it will keep more jobs at [Kennedy Space Center](#)

than Ares I or other rivals. But whatever option is chosen, Metschan said that it is vital that the new panel takes an independent look.

"It's important that we get this right because the best option was not chosen first time around," he said. "Engineers always suspected that Ares I was DOA."

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