

Panel to evaluate NASA's manned spaceflight program

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A 10-member committee of former astronauts, aerospace executives and academics kicks off an 11-week evaluation of America's manned spaceflight program Wednesday - and the stakes couldn't be higher.

Chaired by retired Lockheed Martin CEO Norm Augustine, the committee must deal with an incredibly tight schedule, pressure from [NASA](#) contractors and their backers on Capitol Hill, and a reliance on NASA officials to provide technical analyses of rival projects.

The White House charged the panel to take a hard look at NASA's manned-space strategy for the next decade, paying special attention to the agency's efforts to develop a new rocket system to replace the space shuttle when it retires next year.

NASA's critics have said there's no way its Constellation program of new rockets, capsules and lunar landers can meet its 2015 launch schedule _ let alone return astronauts to the moon by 2020 - given its technical problems and multibillion-dollar cost overruns.

On the other hand, NASA executives insist it would take years, and more billions, just to make existing commercial rockets capable of transporting humans to the international space station, let alone the moon. And meanwhile, the clock is ticking for thousands of workers at Kennedy Space Center, whose jobs will vanish when the shuttle is retired. And depending on the committee's findings, KSC's future could

be bleak.

Augustine, an aerospace veteran considered independent and smart, acknowledged last month that the group will have to determine what sort of manned-space program the U.S. can afford.

"We're being told there's no sense in being unrealistic and putting together a program that can't possibly be afforded," he said in an interview. "(But) as we go through this evaluation, if we were to find there were reasons the budget didn't make sense in any way, I can assure you we would not be bashful about pointing that out, and I suspect the administration would want to know that anyway."

But one former NASA official doubted whether the panel could fairly evaluate all the options for human spaceflight in the time that it was given. "I don't see how it's possible to make a technical judgment in that period of time," said Scott Pace, now the director of the Space Policy Institute at George Washington University.

The committee will hear Wednesday from several groups promoting Constellation alternatives, including United Launch Alliance (ULA), the maker of the Atlas and Delta rockets used by the Department of Defense to lift spy satellites into orbit and by NASA to carry robotic missions to the moon, Mars and beyond.

Also testifying is a group of freelance engineers and rocket enthusiasts behind the Direct Jupiter project, which proposes to use the shuttle's main engines, fuel tank and solid-rocket boosters to create a family of rockets that can carry crews and cargo to the moon.

Both ULA and Direct have claimed that their systems would be safer, cheaper - and ready sooner - than Constellation's Ares I rocket. NASA's shuttle program manager John Shannon also will promote a variation of

the shuttle that would substitute another spacecraft for the orbiter.

But former NASA administrator Mike Griffin dismissed these and other alternatives as unworkable, unaffordable or both. Many were rejected by a closed-door NASA review in 2005 that critics say was rigged in favor of a design backed by Griffin. That design, using a stack of the shuttle's solid-rocket boosters as a first stage, became the Ares I, now plagued by technical and cost problems.

Constellation has also gotten scathing reviews by congressional investigators, leading many experts to think a fair-minded review could doom the program.

Indeed, the scrutiny is causing anxiety in NASA. Constellation officials told contractors recently that they are not happy that Wednesday's hearing is stacked with rival projects.

But backers of alternatives are equally worried that they might not get a fair hearing.

Constellation rivals are particularly concerned that the three teams in charge of analyzing data for the commission are headed by senior NASA officials, including Ralph Roe, who last year worked on a study to speed up the Constellation project.

Stephen Metschan, the head of the Direct project, has complained loudly about the potential for bias. "I don't think they'd want me reviewing their stuff," Metschan told the Orlando Sentinel.

But according to Phil McAlister, a NASA official assigned to the committee, the panel has "set in motion" efforts to bring in non-NASA experts to help with some of the analysis.

"The NASA review team is perfectly capable of performing all the analysis we need, but this is an independent committee and on specific tasks or specific topics" it would be preferable to have non-NASA analysis, he said.

The committee has also had to fend off political pressure _ especially from lobbyists and lawmakers unhappy with a White House directive that the commission's recommendations must fit into NASA's projected budget, which the Obama administration has just reduced by \$3.1 billion through 2013.

Among those who told Augustine to ignore the budget was U.S. Sen. Bill Nelson, D-Fla., who confirmed that he told Augustine not to feel bound by the budget.

"What I said is what I always said: that these initial numbers out of the Obama administration in 2012, 2013 and 2014 are too lean," Nelson explained. "We have to plus that up if we are going to have a space program and do the things that Obama has said. The goal is on the moon by 2020."

Whatever the outcome, there is a sense in the space community _ and in NASA _ that the committee must be seen as completely unbiased to maintain its credibility.

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