

To the moon, NASA? Not on this budget, experts say

August 26 2009, By SETH BORENSTEIN , AP Science Writer



In this Aug. 14, 2009 photo, a new space vehicle stands ready in NASA Kennedy Space Center's Vehicle Assembly Building in Florida. The final segments of the Ares I-X rocket, including the simulated crew module and launch abort system, were stacked on Aug. 13 on a mobile launcher platform, completing the 327-foot launch vehicle and providing the first entire look of Ares I-X's distinctive shape. The Ares I-X flight test is targeted for Oct. 31. (AP Photo/ NASA)

(AP) -- NASA will test the powerful first stage of its new Ares moon rocket Thursday, a milestone in a program that has already spent \$7 billion for a rocket that astronauts may never use.

When that first stage is tested, it will be mounted horizontally. The engine will fire, shake and make lots of noise. But by design, it will not leave the ground. The same could be said for NASA's plans to go to the

moon, Mars or beyond Earth orbit. It's not so much a physical challenge for engineers as it is a financial challenge for budgeteers.

The \$108 billion program to return to the moon by 2020 was started five years ago by then-President George W. Bush. But a special independent panel commissioned by President [Barack Obama](#) concluded that the plan cannot work on the existing budget schedule because it's likely to cost at least an extra \$30 billion through 2020.

Even NASA's soon-to-be-retired [space](#) shuttle fleet has proved that getting off the ground isn't a given, with two launch scrubs this week of a mission to the [international space station](#).

The space station is finally finished. Yet NASA's long-standing plans call for junking the outpost in about seven years. If the agency keeps that schedule, it would mean that in the next decade NASA's [astronauts](#) could be going nowhere if there's no moon mission.

Obama's special panel looked at other options available for the space program - such as skipping the moon and going directly to Mars or an asteroid, or just cruising in the solar system. But they kept using words like "least worst scenario" during their final public deliberations earlier this month. In their report due Monday, they will also give advice about the end of the shuttle and space station programs.

The White House told the panel to aim to stay within current budget estimates.

"If you want to do something, you have to have the money to do it," said panel member and former astronaut Sally Ride. "This budget is very, very, very hard to fit and still have an exploration program."

The options that face the White House come down to variations and

combinations of these themes: Pay more, do less or radically change American space policy. The most radical idea would be to hand much of NASA's duties to private companies.

"The problem is the size 14 foot in the size 10 shoe," said American University public policy professor Howard McCurdy, author of several books about the American space program. "It's just really hard to fit it all in. A lot of the assumptions made in 2004 (for the Bush plan) have just not materialized."

The panel will not tell the president which choice to make. That will be up to Obama. Until NASA is told to change course, it will continue with the Bush plan.

Thus, the first big test of moon program hardware is the rocket stage firing Thursday in Promontory, Utah. That test is of the main get-off-the-ground engine in the Ares I rocket. The full test rocket, complete with a dummy crew capsule and escape system, Ares I-X, is supposed to get a launch test at Kennedy Space Center on Oct. 31.

That rocket will be taller than the [space shuttle](#), illustrating an agency eager to launch something new.

"NASA has been like a star athlete that's broken world records back in the 1960s and is stuck in the bleachers ever since, unable to suit up for what it does best," said space scientist Alan Stern, who quit last year as NASA's associate administrator for science.

But, as has been the case since about 1971, money is holding engineers back, Stern said.

"Bush never delivered on his promise to up NASA's funding," Stern said. He added that the previous NASA administrator "tried cannibalizing

NASA (to pay for exploration) but that wasn't enough."

While the Bush administration cut some spending, the "real killer" came in Obama's first budget, which starts in October, said Scott Pace, the No. 3 at NASA during the Bush administration. Obama cut \$3 billion from projections for future spending on exploration, with even more cut when inflation is factored in, said Pace, director of space policy at George Washington University.

The administration gave the agency an extra \$400 million, however, as part of the stimulus package.

Former NASA associate administrator Scott Hubbard said if the United States invited other countries, including Russia and perhaps China, on the next space journey, it would keep America's costs lower. It's an idea the panel and some in the Obama administration have discussed.

Some kind of change is needed in [NASA](#) plans, said Hubbard, a professor at Stanford University: "What we ended up with now is clearly unsustainable."

On the Net:

NASA's moon program:

http://www.nasa.gov/mission_pages/constellation/main/index.html

The outside panel looking at human spaceflight:

<http://www.nasa.gov/offices/hsf/home/index.html>

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Citation: To the moon, NASA? Not on this budget, experts say (2009, August 26) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2009-08-moon-nasa-experts.html>

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