

NASA to get more money, but must scratch moon plan

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(AP) -- President Barack Obama is essentially grounding efforts to return astronauts to the moon and instead is sending NASA in new directions with roughly \$6 billion more, according to officials familiar with the plans.

A White House official confirmed Thursday that when next week's budget is proposed, NASA will get an additional \$5.9 billion over five years, as first reported in Florida newspapers. Some of that money would extend the life of the International Space Station to 2020. It also would be used to entice companies to build private spacecraft to ferry astronauts to the space station after the space shuttle retires, said the official who was not authorized to speak by name.

The money in the president's budget is not enough to follow through with NASA's Constellation moon landing plan initiated by President George W. Bush. An aide to an elected official who was told of Obama's plans, but who asked that his name not be used because of the sensitivity of the discussions, said Obama is effectively ending the return-to-the-moon effort, something that has already cost \$9.1 billion.

It all comes down to money. The six-year-old Bush plan, which a former NASA chief called "Apollo on steroids," sputtered when promised budget increases didn't materialize. And now money is a big consideration in NASA's latest shift in focus.

A new direction for NASA has been on hold for several months while an

independent commission studied options and the White House weighed them. Obama's choice will be made clear Monday, when he releases his 2011 budget proposal.

"It certainly appears that the Bush moon mission not going to be included" in future funding, said a senior NASA official who spoke on the condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to talk about the plans.

Space policy scholar John Logsdon, who was on an Obama space campaign advisory committee and has served on NASA advisory panels, said Obama is adopting the preferred option of a White House-appointed outside panel of experts last year. That concept includes reliance on a commercial spaceship, a space station that functions for five more years than planned, and a "flexible path" for human space exploration. That might mean trips to a nearby asteroid, a Martian moon or a brief visit to the moon, instead of the Bush plan for a moon base by the end of the decade.

"What kills the moon mission is the decision to extend the space station to 2020," Logsdon said. That means the Bush goal of "moon by 2020 is dead. We can't afford using the station for five more years and going to the moon."

While the Constellation program "is dead, exploration is not dead and that's really important," Logsdon said.

Already proponents of the moon mission and thousands of workers in space centers in Florida, Alabama and Texas are upset. Congressional officials in those states have denounced such ideas and some of them sit on key committees where they could fight Obama's plans. For example, Sen. Bill Nelson, D-Fla., chairs the space subcommittee in the Senate. And the chairwoman of the House space subcommittee, Rep. Gabrielle

Giffords, D-Ariz., is married to a space shuttle astronaut.

The budget numbers were first reported this week by the Orlando Sentinel and Florida Today.

In a statement, Rep. Suzanne Kosmas, D-Fla., said, "The president's proposal would leave NASA with essentially no program and no timeline for exploration beyond Earth's orbit."

Ken Matthews, a member of the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers in Huntsville, Ala., said his members worry about "jobs that won't be there."

If Obama does cancel the Constellation program, it "leaves NASA and the nation with no program, no plan and no commitment to any human spaceflight program beyond that of today," said former NASA Administrator Michael Griffin in a statement.

He said this would be recommending "that the nation abandon its leadership on the space frontier," Griffin said.

Kosmas and others raised questions about the safety of switching to a privately run space travel system that NASA would pay to carry astronauts. Companies pursuing such business include Space Exploration Technology Corp. which is already building a new rocket, called Falcon, and capsule, called Dragon. The company is run by PayPal founder Elon Musk.

And a recent report by NASA's Aerospace Safety Advisory Panel warned NASA not pursue unproven technology and abandon the Ares I rocket - the first rocket in the Bush moon program and one based on the Apollo design.

The report called such a path "unwise and probably not cost-effective."

But the Obama administration official said the Bush program was so underfunded that it wouldn't get astronauts to the moon until 2028 or 2030.

The Bush moon plan was announced after the 2003 Columbia accident that killed seven astronauts. After that disaster in which the shuttle broke apart as it returned to Earth, a special investigative panel said NASA needed a new goal. In January 2004, Bush proposed the return to the moon. It would have involved the Ares I rocket, carrying astronauts in a capsule called Orion. Another Ares spacecraft would carry heavier cargo.

So far NASA has spent \$3.5 billion on Ares I and \$3.7 billion on Orion and nearly \$2 billion on other moon mission work. In the mid-1990s, NASA went through a similar stutter-step that meant abandoning plans that cost billions. That involved President Ronald Reagan's Freedom space station, which ran into trouble after costing \$11 billion without building any hardware. President Bill Clinton had the space station redesigned and restarted.

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