

NASA official works to save rocket, despite White House wishes

April 26 2010, By Robert Block and Mark. K. Matthews

The day after President Barack Obama visited Kennedy Space Center last week to unveil his new vision for NASA, the manager of the moon program that Obama wants to kill told his team to draw up plans in case Obama fails to win congressional support.

In an e-mail sent on April 16, NASA's [Constellation Program](#) Manager, Jeff Hanley, instructed his managers to "prioritize" all the resources they have at their disposal under this year's budget to plan for test flights of prototypes of the troubled Ares I rocket that Obama aims to cancel.

Hanley also orders them to look at ways to shrink the Constellation program in such a way that it can fit in a tighter rocket development budget backed by the White House. The move comes as some members of Congress have pledged to stop Obama and save Ares.

"This direction," Hanley wrote in the e-mail, "remains consistent with ... policy to continue program execution and planning in the event that the program or parts thereof will continue beyond (this financial) year."

However, according to NASA officials, the move was done without the blessing of NASA headquarters and appears to disregard long-term White House goals. Some senior administration officials view it as a last-ditch effort by supporters of the over-budget and behind-schedule Constellation program to keep it alive in spite of White House opposition. One Constellation Program spokeswoman said it was merely prudent planning by NASA management.

During a nationally televised 26-minute speech before several hundred lawmakers, [aerospace industry](#) executives and local political leaders, Obama last week outlined a vision for the stars that did not include either Constellation's Ares I rocket that NASA was building to take crew into orbit around the Earth, or the Ares V heavy lifter that was slated to launch a moon lander and enough fuel and supplies to take astronauts back to the lunar surface.

The only part of Constellation that got a reprieve from the president was the Orion crew capsule, which is supposed to be redesigned to serve as a lifeboat on the International Space Station as a first step to developing it as long-range space exploration vehicle.

Hanley appears to use the president's plan as the justification for his e-mail, as it refers specifically to Orion and does not mention Ares I at all. The aim of the testing program, he wrote, was "targeted to the launch of a crew-capable Orion by March 2015."

One [Kennedy Space Center](#) manager sent Hanley's e-mail to local engineers, saying that Hanley was "aligning (Constellation) to the Heavy-lift test flight activity added and proposed by the president yesterday."

But according to administration officials familiar with the e-mail, the instructions given to local engineers seem directly opposed to what the White House and senior NASA officials want.

"I do not think this is what the president called for," said one senior administration official not authorized to speak publicly for NASA or the White House.

Last year NASA successfully launched the Ares I-X -- a four segment shuttle booster with a dummy Orion spacecraft to test whether the Ares I concept of a capsule on top of solid rocket motor could fly. Despite its

success, the White House pulled the plug on Ares I because a blue ribbon panel found that it was too expensive for what it proposed doing -- taking astronauts into low-Earth orbit.

According to NASA officials at Kennedy Space Center and Johnson Space Center in Houston, while Hanley's e-mail does not mention Ares I by name, Hanley has told NASA engineers and contractors to study more tests of Ares I rocket prototypes in 2012 and 2013 as a way to launch Orion.

Continued Ares I tests have earned the support of at least one lawmaker: Sen. Bill Nelson. The Florida Democrat largely backs Obama's NASA plan but inserted language into congressional budget documents this week that aims to continue the tests as a way to save a few hundred jobs at Kennedy Space Center and help build another NASA rocket.

Indeed, according to NASA engineers, some of the testing and studies are aimed to create what's being called the Ares IV.

The new rocket would use pieces of the Ares I - it's upper stage and five-segment solid rocket booster - with a new heavy first-stage liquid engine. While the rocket would be nowhere near as powerful - or as expensive - as the planned Ares V, it is believed capable of taking astronauts into a lunar orbit.

NASA spokeswoman Lynnette Madison said the Constellation program is only doing some responsible contingency planning.

"It's a way of looking at what we have and what we could do," she said. "Right now it's all talk and planning." She added that it was being done only at the program level and had yet to bring in NASA headquarters in Washington.

But the effort could give more fuel to lawmakers who want to stymie White House plans to cancel Ares and rely on commercial rocket companies to supply space station with crew and cargo. At a [NASA](#) hearing on Thursday, Republican Sen. Richard Shelby vowed to do what it takes to save Ares, which is largely managed at Marshall Space Flight Center in his home state of Alabama.

"To abandon Ares I as a baseline vehicle for an alternative without demonstrated capability nor proven superiority ... is unwise and probably not cost-effective," he said. "This plan would destroy decades of U.S. space supremacy by pinning our hopes for success on unproven commercial companies. This budget is not a proposal for space exploration worthy of this great nation."

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Distributed by McClatchy-Tribune Information Services.

Citation: NASA official works to save rocket, despite White House wishes (2010, April 26)
retrieved 3 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-04-nasa-rocket-white-house.html>

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