

Obama's NASA plans may be in trouble

May 7 2010, By Mark K. Matthews and Robert Block

President Barack Obama's grand plans for NASA appear in big trouble. Three weeks after Obama told an audience at Kennedy Space Center that he wants to land astronauts on an asteroid by 2025, Congress remains unconvinced, largely because Obama's proposal also puts commercial rocket companies in charge of getting astronauts to the International Space Station after the space shuttle is retired this year.

Few Democrats have publicly endorsed the entire plan, while opponents such as Alabama Republican Sen. Richard Shelby, who looks after the interests of NASA's Marshall [Space](#) Flight Center in Huntsville, continue to blast the proposal as "unrealistic" and "destructive."

[NASA](#) itself also appears to be hedging its bets that the president's vision might not pass muster with Congress. KSC officials and contractors, under direction from Johnson Space Center and [NASA Administrator](#) Charlie Bolden, are pressing ahead with plans for test flights of a multibillion-dollar Ares I rocket that Obama wants to cancel.

Meanwhile, big aerospace contractors are trying to sell members of Congress on a new \$8 billion rocket that could be fashioned from pieces of the space shuttle, which is supposed to be retired later this year. Last week, a group of contractors led by aerospace giant Boeing Co. met Sen. Bill Nelson, D-Fla., to push the new rocket idea. Nelson previously has backed more Ares test flights.

Although there is little unity in Congress on what to do next, most experts agree it could stall -- or even derail -- White House aims to retire

the shuttle and to cancel NASA's long-standing plans to return astronauts to the moon.

"Purgatory is exactly the right word," said John Logsdon, a space expert at George Washington University. The White House can't marshal support to quickly pass the new NASA policy, while opponents have been unable to get enough traction to kill it outright.

"The only thing ... is that purgatory was a waiting period with a guaranteed outcome. The people in purgatory were going to go to heaven," said Logsdon, who noted the Obama space plan does not come with a similar guarantee.

At this point, the new NASA policy has stalled in Congress and could remain so until the end of the year, according to Capitol Hill aides and industry sources. In the meantime, lawmakers and NASA officials are busy studying alternatives.

Democratic U.S. Rep. Suzanne Kosmas, whose Florida district includes KSC, wants NASA to "slow the flight rate of the remaining (three) [space shuttle](#) missions" and add at least one more so shuttles could fly through 2012, according to a recent letter she sent to media. Although described as a "great champion" by Obama when he visited the center, Kosmas still isn't satisfied with his plan.

Key is what to do with Constellation, a spacecraft program that has consumed more than \$9 billion in federal funds during the past five years.

When first conceived, NASA had planned on using its Ares rockets and Orion capsule to return astronauts to the moon by 2020. But financial and technical woes have made that goal impossible, and Obama wants to cancel everything in Constellation but the crewed Orion capsule so that

NASA could focus on new technology that could enable a future asteroid mission.

Several lawmakers, however, are pushing to save the Ares rocket, and a top NASA official recently drew up plans to continue all of Constellation in case Congress does not approve the Obama policy. Shelby has helped lead the charge, as his state was tasked with the bulk of Ares work.

Even Nelson, who described Obama's speech at KSC as "visionary," has advocated continued Ares rocket testing because it could mean a few hundred jobs at the center, which is set to lose as many as 9,000 workers once the shuttle completes its final three missions.

Much of the gridlock over Obama's plan can be traced back to one sentence inserted by Shelby into a spending bill last year that bars NASA from canceling Constellation programs this year without congressional approval. Not only has that sentence prevented NASA from quickly switching to Obama's new plan, but it also has given Congress time to kill his proposal and save Constellation.

Indeed, the tactic has proven so effective that lawmakers loyal to Constellation are considering a similar move in upcoming spending bills. That possibility has bureaucrats on both sides of the issue combing through thick pages of appropriations measures to ensure that the other doesn't gain ground.

With such scrutiny, the issue may not be decided until Congress ultimately approves its 2011 budget -- which may not happen until the winter holiday season.

Still, the president isn't entirely helpless. If Congress wraps most or all of its spending bills into one package as it has done in recent years, then he

could lean on top leaders in the House and Senate to give cover to his space plan.

White House officials, however, said Wednesday that they were making headway in convincing Congress to support Obama's space plan and were optimistic. "We will continue to work closely with NASA and the Congress in the weeks and months ahead so that we can work as swiftly as possible to advance this bold and ambitious new space policy," said Moira Mack, White House spokeswoman.

Matthews reported Washington and Block from Cape Canaveral, Fla.

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