

US Senate votes to extend space shuttle program

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The space shuttle Discovery lifts off from the Kennedy Space Center in Florida in April 2010. A key Senate panel has approved a 2011 budget proposal for the US space agency NASA that would extend the space shuttle program in a compromise from the Obama administration's demands.

A key Senate panel approved Thursday a 2011 budget proposal for the US space agency NASA that would extend the space shuttle program in a compromise from the Obama administration's demands.

Republican and Democratic members of the Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee unanimously approved the legislation, after months of debate and criticism.

The powerful Senate Budget Committee must still approve the bill before sending it to the full chamber for a vote.

Although the plan maintains the White House's 19-billion-dollar request for NASA funding for the fiscal year that begins on October 1, it adds another shuttle mission in 2011 to the two already scheduled for November and February.

The US space shuttles are set to be being retired early next year, after President Barack Obama opted not to fund a successor program, opting instead to encourage private spacecraft development.

NASA will then depend on Russia to fly astronauts to the International Space Station orbiting outpost until a new private or US government spacecraft becomes available.

The Senate committee's bill ordered NASA to begin working on a heavy-lift rocket immediately, rather than in 2015, as proposed by Obama.

"NASA is an agency in transition. We've had to take a clear, hard look at what we want from our space agency in the years and decades to come," Democratic Senator Jay Rockefeller, who chairs the Senate panel, said in a statement.

"I've made my views on this matter very clear: NASA's role cannot stay static. It must innovate and move in a new direction."

Senator Richard Shelby, the top Republican on the panel, said the measure "wisely rejects the administration's outright cancellation of NASA's human space flight program, and instead provides a clear path forward for the agency's exploration program."

"I will continue to work diligently with my colleagues to craft and enact a rational plan that maintains American leadership and superiority in space exploration," the Senator for Alabama added in a statement.

Texas Republican Kay Bailey Hutchison, a co-sponsor of the bill, stressed that Obama's plans "would have ended the era of US dominance in space exploration, threatened the use of the space station, and jeopardized manned spaceflight."

"This legislation approved today represents a strong balance between the need for investment in new technology and the continued evolution of the commercial market to take an increasing role in supporting our efforts in low Earth orbit," she added.

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