

Hubble successor in trouble

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For years, astronomers have set their sights on launching a successor to the Hubble Space Telescope-one with 100 times its power-that could peer back to the earliest light of the universe. But funding for the costly James Webb Space Telescope is now under a cloud, targeted for the chopping block.

Amid the larger [budget](#) debate, a House appropriations committee vote last month proposed killing the [telescope](#).

Costs have risen to \$6.8 billion-up 50 percent from a 2005 estimate-and may go higher after another NASA review next year.

The telescope is "billions of dollars over budget and plagued by poor management," said the committee, in a statement accompanying the bill, which also proposed cutting NASA's budget 9 percent to \$16.8 billion.

Astronomers and political supporters, such as Sen. Barbara Mikulski, D-Md., have mobilized to try to save the observatory, which is named for a former [NASA administrator](#), not Sen. Jim Webb, D-Va.

Scheduled for launch no sooner than 2018, four years late, the 21-foot-wide telescope would see the faint light of the first stars, and peer within dust clouds to see planets grow around young stars.

For more than a decade, astronomers have pinned plans on the telescope, which would be equipped with tennis-court-sized shades that unfold to cool the spacecraft against sunlight.

"It will be a game-changer, revolutionary," says University of Chicago astrophysicist Michael Turner, a former National Science Foundation official. However, an expert report last year headed by John Casani of NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory, found that the telescope's cost had increased about \$1.5billion just since 2008.

NASA moved new management in, but the report clearly angered the science spending committee headed by Rep. Frank Wolf, R-Va. A committee report said, "that this step will ultimately benefit NASA by setting a cost discipline example for other projects."

When the July vote was taken, Wolf expressed support for the telescope's mission, but only if NASA undertakes fundamental changes in its budget process. He noted that budget busting for the Webb telescope, which the journal Nature last year called "the telescope that ate astronomy," threatened NASA's other science missions.

"Losing the telescope would be a huge blow to U.S. science and prestige," Turner says. "We would basically be telling the world we can't do great things anymore."

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