

NASA says it's working to resolve items' ownership

January 9 2012, By CURT ANDERSON , AP Legal Affairs Writer

(AP) -- The head of NASA met Monday with former astronauts to discuss who owns space artifacts from moon shots and other missions, saying afterward that the agency will work cooperatively with them to resolve what's recently become a contentious issue.

NASA chief Charles Bolden said in a statement that there have been "fundamental misunderstandings and unclear policies" regarding items that astronauts took home from the Mercury, Gemini, Apollo and Skylab programs. The statement marks a switch from NASA's recent confrontational stance, which included suing Apollo 14 astronaut Edgar Mitchell in Miami federal court over rights to a 16mm video camera that went to the moon.

"These are American heroes, fellow astronauts, and personal friends who have acted in good faith, and we have committed to work together to find the right policy and legal paths forward to address outstanding ownership questions," Bolden said.

Mitchell and other astronauts have said NASA officials told them long ago they could keep certain equipment from the missions, and over the years collectors have paid millions for space items.

Monday's meeting followed stories by The Associated Press and others last week on NASA raising questions about whether Apollo 13 commander James Lovell had the right to sell a 70-page checklist from Apollo 13, which received a bid at a November auction of more than

\$388,000. It is valuable because it contains Lovell's handwritten calculations considered key to navigating the crippled spacecraft back to Earth following an oxygen tank explosion.

In a letter to Dallas-based Heritage Auctions, NASA also questioned the ownership of two items from Apollo 9 astronaut Rusty Schweickart - a lunar module identification plate and a hand controller - and a glove worn by Alan Shepard during training for Apollo 14. Those also received sizable bids in the November auction.

Schweickart also attended the Monday meeting, according to NASA, along with fellow Apollo astronauts Gene Cernan and Charlie Duke.

Bolden said the ownership discussions will explore "all policy, legislative and other legal means" to resolve ownership issues "and ensure that appropriate artifacts are preserved and available for display to the American people."

An assistant said Monday that Lovell was traveling and wasn't immediately available to comment. The checklist and other items from the November auction are being kept in a Heritage Auctions vault pending outcome of the inquiry, company officials said.

Mitchell and others have said they were given broad latitude in deciding which artifacts they could take home.

Before he settled the camera lawsuit with NASA, Mitchell produced a 2002 letter from a former director at NASA's Johnson Space Center in Houston that appeared to back up their position. That letter, signed by retired director Christopher Kraft Jr., said that he approved a policy allowing Apollo astronauts to keep personal items that flew with them as well anything from the lunar landing module that was abandoned on the moon anyway.

"It was generally accepted that the astronauts could bring back pieces of equipment or hardware from this spacecraft for a keepsake of these journeys," Kraft wrote.

That letter, however, does not address whether astronauts can sell the items. In its letter to the auction house, NASA insisted only the agency can approve such artifacts for sale.

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