

How will sequestration affect NASA?

March 1 2013, by Nancy Atkinson



NASA Administrator Charles Bolden addresses the media at SpaceX's main hangar in Cape Canaveral, FL. The sequester will affect both NASA and SpaceX. Credit: NASA

It seems the US is not going to avoid the sequester—the \$85 billion worth of federal spending cuts due to kick in March 1, 2013. There will be across the board cuts to government agencies, applying equally to defense and non-defense spending, and will affect services from meat

inspections to air traffic control. In some cases, federal workers will be furloughed or could stand to lose as much as 20 percent of their pay. One question no one can answer is how long it will take for Congress and the Obama administration to come to an agreement on a package that would reduce the deficit.

But in the near term, how will it affect NASA?

"Sequestration would significantly set back the ambitious space exploration plan the President and Congress have asked NASA to carry out," [NASA Administrator](#) Charlie Bolden said in a message to NASA employees this week. "These damaging cuts would slash roughly 5 percent from the agency's current annual budget during the remaining seven months of the 2013 fiscal year, a loss of about \$726 million from the President's [budget request](#). This could further delay the restarting of human space launches from U.S. soil, push back our next generation [space vehicles](#), and hold up development of new space technologies.

In hard numbers, NASA's overall budget would drop to \$16.9 billion, down from the \$17.8 billion Congress approved last year.

NASA [civil servants](#) are safe from furloughs, but NASA contractors will see cuts in their contracts.

In a press conference on Feb. 28, preceding the scheduled March 1 launch of the SpaceX Dragon capsule to the ISS, NASA's Space Station Manager Mike Suffredini said the ISS would not be impacted very much. With humans on board the ISS, there can be no cuts in operations that would endanger the crew. While Suffredini didn't say so, if the cuts continue long-term to NASA, there likely would be an impact to science being done, and perhaps eventually crew size.

Spending on the commercial crew program might take one of the biggest

hits, and would be reduced to \$388 million, which is \$18 million less than it is currently spending and \$441.6 million less than the agency had been planning to spend in 2013. Boeing, Sierra Nevada, and SpaceX are all under contract to meet performance milestones to deliver cargo and ultimately crew (by 2017) to the International Space Station.

In a separate letter to Senate Appropriations Committee Chairwoman Barbara Mikulski, (D-MD) Bolden said NASA's commercial crew partners would be affected by this summer, as NASA would no longer be able to fund upcoming events such as a test of Boeing's CST-100 orbital maneuvering and attitude control engine in July, a September review of an in-flight abort test SpaceX plans to conduct in April 2014, and an October integrated system and safety analysis review of Sierra Nevada's DreamChaser space plane.

Also at the SpaceX press conference on Feb. 28, SpaceX President Gwynne Shotwell said the specifics of how the sequestration will affect her company is not yet known, but it will likely impact some of their milestones if the budget issues aren't resolved soon.

Howard Bloom, founder of the Space Development Steering Committee, said these cuts to commercial crew would be a disaster, delaying when US astronauts could launch on US rockets, and would just "shovel" money to Russia.

"This nip and tuck may result in a period of an additional one to two years in which America cannot get astronauts to the International Space Station on our own launch vehicles," he said in a statement sent to Universe Today. "But we are committed to manning the Space Station. How will we do it? Using Russian Soyuz capsules. At a price of \$63 million paid to the Russians for each American passenger— a total of \$350-400 million per year."

Even worse, Bloom said, sequestration could eliminate one of more of the companies working on American launch vehicles, and the result would be "less competition and a potentially higher cost per launch once a new vehicle comes into service."

Science and research will also be affected, with reductions of \$51.1 million below the FY 2013 budget request for astrophysics and science, meaning funding for new missions such as Explorer and Earth Venture Class will be cut, decreasing mission selections by 10 to 15 percent, resulting in lower funding levels for new activities and causing some launch delays. There will also be a reduction in the number of science flight opportunities such as those for college and high school students, and the elimination of Centennial Challenges funding to for any new prizes.

NASA's Space Technology Program would be cut by \$24 million to \$550 million instead of \$699 million, and any updates or construction at NASA facilities would be centers would be canceled. This may impact updates at Kennedy Space Center for infrastructure needed for NASA's [Space](#) Launch System (SLS), the Orion Multi-Purpose Crew Vehicle, and other programs.

As far as other science programs in the US there are [reports](#) that at least 1,000 National Science Foundation grants will be cut, and the National Institute of Health will lose \$3.1 billion.

"We will continue to keep you informed as we learn more about issues surrounding the potential sequestration," Bolden said in his email to NASA employees. Dr. Elizabeth Robinson, Agency Chief Financial Officer, and her staff in the Office of the Chief Financial Officer here at NASA HQ will be following up with the Officials in Charge regarding our plans for implementing sequestration and how those plans will affect NASA's day-to-day operations. Please feel free to contact her or her

staff with questions or concerns."

More information: [Universe Today](#)

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