

# NASA chief: Visiting an asteroid is all agency can afford

April 24 2013, by Mark K. Matthews

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A NASA plan to send astronauts to an asteroid was met with skepticism Wednesday when NASA Chief Charlie Bolden presented the idea to top space officials in Congress - though their doubts may not be enough to sink the program.

The asteroid mission, unveiled a few weeks ago, would send a NASA probe to capture a small asteroid and drag it to a point near the moon so astronauts riding a [new rocket](#) and capsule could visit it, possibly as soon as 2021.

"The goal is (to) remain the world's leader in exploration," Bolden said. But members of the U.S. House science committee took issue with the project's cost and feasibility - and questioned why the agency wasn't planning a return to the moon en route to an eventual mission to Mars.

The [NASA chief](#) delivered a blunt reply: It's all NASA can afford.

"I need money to go to the moon," Bolden said.

As part of its 2014 [budget proposal](#), the White House wants NASA to spend \$105 million next year to begin planning the asteroid mission, which could cost upward of \$2.6 billion.

Broadly, the administration envisions sending a probe as soon as 2017 to capture a 25-foot, 500-ton asteroid and tug it near the moon - possibly to a spot about 277,000 miles from Earth that would use competing [gravitational forces](#) to allow it to "sit" there.

Astronauts flying NASA's new [Orion capsule](#) and Space [Launch System](#) rocket then would visit it to take samples and possibly set foot on its surface.

In addition to scientific benefits, Bolden said an asteroid trip would serve as a steppingstone for an eventual [Mars mission](#) while also teaching [NASA engineers](#) how to divert an asteroid in case one ever threatened Earth. He called it "an unprecedented technological challenge."

Lawmakers, however, wanted to know whether NASA would learn more - and do more - by going back to the moon instead.

"Would (a [moon mission](#)) be a better precursor to a Mars mission?" asked U.S. Rep. Lamar Smith, R-Texas, who chairs the science committee.

Bolden replied that "both are good" but that an asteroid mission was the only program affordable under his proposed 2014 budget of \$17.7 billion.

"Going to the moon is a factor of three (times) more expensive," Bolden said.

NASA is spending about \$3 billion annually to develop the Orion capsule and SLS rocket, and construction of [moon](#) landers and other lunar equipment would add billions of dollars to that.

Not every member of the committee, however, was critical. U.S. Rep. Mo Brooks, R-Ala., said an asteroid mission was a "good direction to go."

And as yet, there's no major opposition in the U.S. Senate, which could help clear the way for the idea to become reality.

At a hearing Tuesday, Sen. Bill Nelson, D-Fla., reiterated support for the White House proposal, and Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas - a fiery freshman who rarely misses a chance to criticize the administration - held his fire.

The lack of resistance is tied to Senate support of the [Space Launch System](#). Senators from key NASA states - Florida, Texas and Alabama - pushed President Barack Obama to build it, and the asteroid mission is seen as a way to give purpose to the rocket, once criticized as a "rocket to nowhere."

Illustrative of that point was the initial reaction of Sen. Richard Shelby, R-Ala.

"NASA should continue to explore the universe and challenge scientific and technical boundaries," he said in a statement. "However, NASA should maintain focus on its core mission and continue development of the Space Launch System so that it will be ready for any future NASA mission."

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Citation: NASA chief: Visiting an asteroid is all agency can afford (2013, April 24) retrieved 18 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2013-04-nasa-chief-asteroid-agency.html>

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