

Could NASA's 2015 budget leave Mars rover Opportunity high and dry?

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NASA's Mars Exploration Rover Opportunity used its navigation camera to take this picture showing a light-toned rock, "Tisdale 2," during the 2,690th Martian day, or sol, of the rover's work on Mars (Aug. 18, 2011). The rock is about 12 inches (30 centimeters) tall. Image Credit: NASA/JPL-Caltech

NASA's Mars rover Opportunity recently passed its 10th anniversary exploring the Red Planet and embarked on what scientists called a brand

new mission, but the trusty little rover's funding has been thrust onto uncertain terrain.

In the \$17.5 billion 2015 budget proposal, NASA's core budget includes funding for several long-standing missions. But two were excluded from the lineup: Opportunity, the surviving half of the Mars Exploration Rover mission, as well as the Lunar Reconnaissance Orbiter, launched in 2009.

Instead, the two missions would be funded within a \$35 million "Planetary Science Extended Mission Funding" line inside the White House's larger \$52 billion "Opportunity, Growth and Security Initiative," a separate funding source that includes funding for a wide range of programs, including preschool, job training and climate change research. But House Republicans have not reacted favorably to the larger initiative, which puts NASA's smaller slice of the initiative pie - and with it, Opportunity and LRO's funding - onto shaky footing.

"The idea of allowing it to die a lonely death out there in space is appalling, particularly when it continues to do good science," Rep. Adam B. Schiff, D-Calif., said of Opportunity. Schiff's district includes NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory, which manages the Mars rover program.

Since landing on the Red Planet in 2004, Opportunity has discovered signs of past water on now-dry terrain and lived roughly 40 times longer than its 90-day warranty. The Lunar Reconnaissance Orbiter set out to map the moon in detail and look for potential safe landing sites for future manned missions (though those long-term efforts have been effectively scrapped for now).

Schiff worried that keeping Opportunity and LRO out of the main funding supply for extended missions and leaving them in a potentially

contentious funding initiative would put two highly effective missions at risk of being shut down.

"Sometimes NASA will do things like this because they know the programs enjoy strong congressional support and they expect Congress to find the money to support the [funding](#)," pointing to Opportunity's popularity with the public. "But that's not a very prudent way to budget or to plan."

NASA Administrator Charles Bolden answered questions about the 2015 budget request in front of the House of Representatives' Subcommittee on Space on Thursday.

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