

Senator may have won fight over private rocket manufacturing

3 July 2009, By Mark K. Matthews and Robert Block

For months, a powerful Republican senator from Alabama has fought the Obama administration to block \$150 million that the White House wanted to spend to help private companies build rockets capable of reaching the international space station.

Now, it appears that U.S. Sen. Richard Shelby has won, in a decision that could have a major impact on the Cape Canaveral work force and America's continued access to [space](#).

According to administration and industry sources, Shelby insisted that \$100 million of the money -- part of \$1 billion set aside for NASA under this spring's economic stimulus bill -- be diverted to Constellation, the troubled rocket program meant to replace the space shuttle after its 2010 retirement.

While details of the concession to Shelby remain unclear, the fight shows the extent to which Shelby will go to defend both Constellation and Marshall Space Flight Center, the Alabama facility that's developing the Ares 1 rocket that is central to Constellation.

"Richard Shelby has represented Alabama voters in Congress for 30 years, so he's not shy about fighting for what he believes is in their interest," said Berin Szoka, chair of the Space Frontier Foundation, which advocates for commercial space development.

The incident also highlights the difficulty that President [Barack Obama](#) could face if he decides to scrap Constellation, which now is under review by an independent panel led by Norm Augustine, the retired CEO of Lockheed Martin.

Obama called for that review amid questions of whether Constellation, which includes the Ares 1 rocket and Orion capsule, could overcome financial and technical hurdles to meet its goal of a first

flight in 2015 and returning astronauts to the moon by 2020.

The panel should issue its recommendations in August. But yielding to Shelby has raised questions as to how effectively Obama can deal with resistance in Congress -- especially after Capitol Hill spiked his first two choices for [NASA administrator](#) before Obama settled on former astronaut Charles Bolden as his nominee.

"The Obama administration is coming into a very difficult situation," said Vincent Sabathier, a space expert with the Center for Strategic and International Studies. "You need to change or you will fail," he said, referring to NASA's course on human spaceflight.

But he noted that every lawmaker, and every rocket company, has a different agenda. "That is why the Augustine Commission is key," Sabathier said, to give Obama the added heft he needs to implement changes.

With the shuttle due to retire next year and Constellation behind schedule, White House science officials had hoped that investing in two commercial space companies could speed up development of an American alternative to buying rides to space from the Russians.

NASA has contracted with the Russians to fly astronauts to the space station from the time the [space shuttle](#) retires until Constellation's first launch. The hope is that the private companies, who have already received NASA money to build cargo rockets, might be able to speed up development of rockets that could launch humans as well.

Those rockets would launch from Cape Canaveral, adjacent to Kennedy Space Center where thousands of workers are facing post-shuttle layoffs. And if the rockets showed real promise,

they could replace Constellation.

Shelby is determined to prevent that from happening.

During recent hearings on NASA's budget, Shelby questioned the viability of the commercial rocket companies _ SpaceX of California and Orbital Sciences of Virginia _ and warned that any money not spent on Constellation could mean more reliance on Russia, not less. U.S. Sen. Bill Nelson, D-Fla., has made a similar argument.

"Sen. Shelby will not support the re-direction of exploration funding for new commercial crew activities when those funds were meant to close the gap between the retirement of the shuttle and the new manned space vehicles Ares and Orion," wrote Jonathan Graffeo, a Shelby spokesman.

Shelby's triumph has enraged the commercial spaceflight community, including SpaceX chairman Elon Musk. He insists his company can build rockets that can launch humans into orbit ahead of Constellation.

"While this could conceivably be advantageous to the parochial interests of a particular district or state, it is unequivocally against the national interest," Musk said.

"The \$150 million for a commercial crew competition would go a long way towards closing the spaceflight gap, while it's a rounding error for the Orion/Ares program," added Lawrence Williams, a SpaceX vice president.

Officially, the Senate subcommittee that oversees NASA funding has released no details about the \$150 million. A spokeswoman for Sen. Barbara Mikulski, the Maryland Democrat who heads the appropriations subcommittee for Commerce, Justice and Science, said simply that she expects the issue to be resolved next week.

But according to one official with the Office of Management and Budget, Shelby is believed to be the only member of Congress who's blocked stimulus funds from flowing to an agency targeted for it.

"We haven't heard of any other senator of any other member of Congress holding up stimulus funding," said the official, who would speak only on background.

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