COMMITTEE ON
SCIENCE, SPACE, AND TECHNOLOGY
REPUBLICANS Frank Lucas, Ranking Member

Opening Statement of Ranking Member Brian Babin

Subcommittee on Space and Aeronautics Hearing – "NASA's Earth Science and Climate Change Activities: Current Roles and Future Opportunities"

May 19, 2021

Today's hearing is particularly timely. The Biden Administration proposed increasing NASA's Earth Science budget by $300 million – a 12.5 percent increase above FY21 enacted levels. Since we don't have other details about the proposed budget yet, we do not know what impact this proposal will have on other aspects of the agency, or how the agency is proposing to spend this increase. While those details may be lacking at this moment, there are a number of other initiatives currently underway at NASA that we can explore.

For example, NASA received the second Earth science decadal review from the National Academies in 2018. This hearing is a great opportunity to understanding how NASA is responding to that report. Previous decadal surveys highlighted NASA's unique role of developing first-of-a-kind instruments that could then be transitioned to operational agencies like NOAA and USGS. As NASA seeks to take on a more operational role in maintaining observational datasets, it will be important for Congress to understand the long-term impacts of this evolution on other Earth science missions, on other science divisions, on other elements of the agency like human exploration, as well as the effects on the government and society as a whole. Maintaining a balanced and sustainable portfolio of programs at NASA could insulate specific programs from wild swings in funding that complicate planning and operations.

One way NASA can take on these new operational roles without breaking the bank or impacting other programs is to leverage the existing commercial remote sensing industry. Previous attempts to incorporate commercial data were met with resistance from the government, and the industry was still in its infancy at the time. The commercial remote industry is much more robust today, and agencies are much more receptive to incorporating data from novel sources. NASA initiated a data buy pilot project in 2017, and more recently stood up a formal Data Acquisition Program.

One near-term decision related to leveraging the commercial remote sensing industry is Landsat. The Landsat program has provided world-class, multi-decade, 30 meter

resolution of Earth's surface. Last year the Administration announced that it was undertaking a Landsat architecture study to explore novel ways to maintain the Landsat dataset. As the former director of the USGS stated at the time, "[r]ather than one single large satellite bus, which is what Landsat has been historically, we've looked at other options…[t]he revolution in space is underway and we'll want to capitalize on that as much as we possibly can." Despite progress made towards this effort over the last several years, NASA issued a request for information (RFI) for Landsat Next instrument studies that may deviate from this plan and return a business as usual approach.

U.S. law and national policy directs NASA to advance the commercial space sector. Title 51 of the U.S. Code direct NASA to, "seek and encourage, to the maximum extent possible, the fullest commercial use of space." NASA is also directed to "…acquire, where cost-effective, space based and airborne Earth remote sensing data, services, distribution, and applications from a commercial provider."

Both the 2014 National Plan for Civil Earth Observations and the 2015 National Space Weather Action Plan direct Federal agencies to identify and pursue commercial solutions. More recently, the 2019 National Plan for Civil Earth Observations directed agencies to "strive to engage with the full Earth Observations Enterprise to determine whether there is a commercial solution available or in process that might be more appropriate than creation of a Federal observing asset." These policies were also reinforced in the most recent decadal survey for Earth science.

I look forward to discussing how NASA plans to incorporate commercial remote sensing data to maximize taxpayer dollars spent on Earth science. Thank you, and I yield back the balance of my time.

###