



COMMITTEE ON

SCIENCE, SPACE, AND TECHNOLOGY

REPUBLICANS Frank Lucas, Ranking Member

Opening Statement of Ranking Member Brian Babin

Space & Aeronautics Subcommittee Hearing - A Review of the Decadal Strategy for
Planetary Science and Astrobiology 2023-2032

May 26, 2022

Good morning, and thank you Mr. Chairman for holding this fascinating hearing.

I'd also like to thank our esteemed witnesses for appearing today. The decadal survey process is no small feat. Not only is the subject complex from a scientific and technological standpoint, but the organizational and coordination aspects are just as daunting. The task of producing a consensus position among brilliant minds that informs the next decade of investments in cutting-edge exploration cannot be understated.

Many of us on Capitol Hill are accustomed to the day-to-day realities of politics, but the decadal process reminds me of the old joke that "academic politics is the most vicious and bitter form of politics, because the stakes are so low." I disagree. The stakes for planetary science are high.

The issues we are discussing influence norms of behavior in space for future generations. The goals we set inspire our children and grandchildren to pursue challenging fields of study like science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. The technologies we develop to enable those discoveries support our economic and national security. That is why the work you do is so important.

The task set before you should be fully appreciated. The questions, destinations, and concepts you evaluated and prioritized were vast and complex. They involved not only planetary science, but also cost estimation, management, budget formulation, supply chain risk, international relations, national security, market analysis, and many, many other aspects that are critical to a successful portfolio of programs.

Previous decadal surveys initiated missions that inspired awe, piqued curiosity, and drew front-page attention on the world's newspapers and nightly news features.

From roving and flying on Mars, to sampling asteroids, to returning dramatic images of distant Pluto, Planetary Science missions capture our imaginations and beckon us to explore farther into the cosmos. This decadal survey continues that tradition.

In addition to reaffirming support for a Mars Sample Return Mission and Europa mission, it also recommends a mission to Uranus, a mission to Saturn's moon Enceladus, and calls for a lunar rover mission to collect large samples over long distances and deliver them to Artemis astronauts for an eventual return to Earth.

The report also provides important support for a Near Earth Object Survey Mission to identify potentially hazardous asteroids that could impact Earth and have catastrophic effects. The recommendation to fully support the development, timely launch, and subsequent operation of the NEO Surveyor mission is particularly important as NASA proposes to slash the NEO Surveyor mission budget and even reprogram existing appropriated funds from the current fiscal year.

These missions recommended by the report will advance science, maintain global leadership, and protect our planet. Bold and ambitious plans are important. As we saw over the last two years, China successfully landed a rover on Mars and returned samples from the Moon. Their plans are ambitious. Ours should be even more ambitious.

But we must be vigilant in how we implement these recommendations and carry out these plans. To the Academies' credit, they also recommended alternative programs if funding is not available to support their aspirational goals. This will enable NASA and Congress to make informed decisions throughout the decade. As we've seen over the years, these decision criteria are important to have when difficult decisions must be made.

In order to turn these recommendations into reality, we must ensure strong program management and accountability. Cost over-runs impact other missions and programs within the division, and can delay future missions. We can't afford to have one program "eat the lunch" of other important activities.

That's why Congress will have to closely examine the recommendation to alter the cost caps for Discovery and New Frontier class missions. I am also interested in better understanding the panel's thoughts on how to limit the risk of international participation cost overruns and schedule delays for the Mars Sample Return mission, as well as the panel's thoughts on how to best use NASA's current astromaterial curation facilities at the Johnson Space Center for Mars samples.

Once again, thank you for your service and time today. I yield back.