



Opening Statement of Space and Aeronautics Subcommittee Chairman Brian Babin

Space and Aeronautics Subcommittee Hearing
*Advancing Scientific Discovery: Assessing the Status of NASA's Science Mission
Directorate*

March 21, 2024

Today's subcommittee hearing will review the activities of NASA's Science Mission Directorate - or SMD - and discuss challenges and opportunities for ensuring success of these activities.

Scientific research has been a core function of NASA since the agency's creation. NASA's science missions have helped us learn more about our planet, discover secrets of the sun, explore our solar system, and better understand our place in the universe.

SMD has had many recent successes. The Perseverance and Curiosity rovers are adding to our understanding of Mars and enabling us to someday send humans to the Martian surface. The Parker Solar Probe continues to deliver unprecedented observations of our sun, and just six months ago OSIRIS-Rex returned asteroid samples to Earth to be studied at the Johnson Space Center.

SMD also carries out some of NASA's most important work by cataloguing and defending our planet from Near-Earth objects.

However, we cannot celebrate these successes without acknowledging the challenges NASA has faced on missions of all sizes.

Just three weeks ago, NASA's Office of Inspector General released an audit of the Mars Sample Return mission – commonly known as MSR - that NASA hopes to launch in partnership with the European Space Agency before the end of the decade.

Anyone who has read prior reports on NASA's science missions from the Inspector General, GAO, or other independent review bodies will see familiar themes in this audit. Project management challenges, including over-optimism on technology development, evolving architectural requirements, and underestimating costs, are but a few of the challenges identified by the Inspector General.

This Committee recognizes the immense value of the MSR mission. We continue to hope that these issues will be resolved and that the MSR mission will be successful.

However, we cannot ignore this now-familiar pattern of schedule and cost overruns for many NASA programs. When missions are delayed, costs increase as a result. Ripple effects are felt throughout NASA as timelines shift and unrelated programs are delayed or canceled to accommodate the troubled project.

Members of this Committee undoubtedly recall the years of delays and the billions of dollars in cost overruns before the James Webb Space Telescope was launched. Another mission, the Psyche spacecraft, finally launched in 2023 after more than a year delay, which incurred significant costs and impacted other missions, such as the VERITAS mission.

We want NASA to engage in bold, daring missions. But Congress must direct NASA to take on these missions with a clear understanding of the associated costs and risks. Consistent cost overruns and delays can result in other worthy missions being postponed or canceled and can create a reluctance for Congress to provide additional funding, or even approve such missions in the future.

Congress has a responsibility to weigh the cost of a mission with its scientific value and cannot simply rationalize cost overruns and schedule delays by stating the end result of these missions will be worthwhile. That is unacceptable to our constituents and should be unacceptable to us all.

This Committee has long supported a balanced approach to NASA's scientific missions across discipline and mission type. I expect that will continue in the future. At Congress's direction, NASA relies on the decadal process carried out by the National Academy of Science to prioritize its scientific activities. This process seeks a broad range of community input to reach a consensus position on priority missions for the following decade.

Recent decadal surveys across disciplines have recommended ambitious missions and optimistic budgets.

This Committee recognizes the importance of the decadal process. But it must also recognize the current fiscal environment and plan accordingly.

The focus of today's hearing is not to chide NASA, but rather to understand the challenges that NASA faces when fulfilling decadal priorities. We also want to be sure that both Congress and NASA are applying lessons learned from previous missions to facilitate future mission successes.

I thank our distinguished panel of witnesses for joining us today and I look forward to a productive discussion.