Monday, November 7, 2011

The Honorable Barbara Mikulski
Chair, Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on
Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Agencies
503 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Frank Wolf
Chair, House Appropriations Subcommittee on
Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Agencies
241 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairwoman Mikulski and Chairman Wolf:

The National Aeronautics and Space Administration serves as a key source of inspiration for America's young people to take up careers in engineering, science, and math, and represents an invaluable asset to our nation's economic competitiveness on the global stage. As a group of former Space Shuttle pilots and commanders, Space Shuttle mission specialists and payload specialists, American crewmembers from the International Space Station, and other former NASA astronauts, we are supporters of our space program and want to see NASA continue to be healthy and vibrant in the years to come.

It is important for the United States to preserve its leading position in space over other human spaceflight powers such as Russia and China. America will for a significant time be dependent on Russian rockets to launch our astronauts to the International Space Station now that the Space Shuttle is retired. Our space agency is going to be shipping potentially billions of dollars to Russia over the next few years to obtain seats for our astronauts -- we should invest that money here in the U.S. commercial space transportation industry instead. China is vigorously pursuing its human spaceflight program, and will surely be quick to point out it has a capability that the United States does not: human space transportation.

Fortunately, NASA has already begun work with commercial spaceflight firms such as Boeing, SpaceX, United Launch Alliance, Sierra Nevada Corporation, and Blue Origin to advance the development of systems capable of

carrying American crews to orbit. These capsules and vehicles will fly on rockets that have already flown to orbit multiple times, such as the Atlas V and Falcon 9. NASA's Commercial Crew Program will enable commercial human spaceflight spacecraft to be fully developed and flown, and provide a domestic source of U.S. access to space. So we urge continued support for the Commercial Crew Program and for America's growing commercial spaceflight sector.

Because Commercial Crew is so important for NASA's future, we believe it should be fully funded and kept as one of NASA's top near-term priorities. Funding Commercial Crew at least at the Authorization Act level of $500 million will mean less reliance on Russia and a stronger space program here at home, and funding Commercial Crew at NASA's requested level of $850 million will enable these commercial vehicles to be developed on an even more expeditious basis. More robust funding for Commercial Crew will ensure that we get more use out of the Space Station, by getting Americans back up into space faster.

We understand there are many programs competing for limited NASA funding; however, Commercial Crew funding must be kept as one of the top priorities if America is to retain its position as the world's number one spacefaring nation, ahead of other spaceflight powers like Russia and China. Simply put, Commercial Crew represents the most rapid way for America to get back its human space transportation capability following retirement of the Space Shuttle, and for America to end the "gap" in human spaceflight. The US will be back with its own capability soonest through Commercial Crew. Without Commercial Crew, America will be on the sidelines for years and years. And as long as America lacks a domestic means to access and maintain our $100 billion International Space Station, then we are running a risk that any setback to the Russian space program or a deterioration of US-Russian relations could force us to temporarily or perhaps permanently evacuate the American crew from the ISS.

Critically, the Commercial Crew program will also save taxpayer money. Commercial space firms are investing their own capital alongside NASA's investment, and this means that the taxpayer doesn't shoulder the entire burden. Also, because commercial launch vehicles such as Atlas V and Falcon 9 have already flown to orbit multiple times, the Commercial Crew Program will allow America to regain our human spaceflight capability in the lowest-cost manner, since it will not require taxpayers to pay for the development of all-new launch vehicles simply to get our astronauts to Earth orbit. And, as the history of other industries has shown, unlocking the power of competition can reduce costs even further.

In addition to saving taxpayer money, Commercial Crew increases our utilization of the International Space Station. And since the Commercial Crew Program will not be reliant on any one company's success – instead, NASA will invest in multiple winners including a varied set of companies and ideas – the Space Station will have a more secure future. Commercial Crew will also help secure a stronger NASA astronaut corps for the future, due to increased International Space Station utilization and more astronaut launches. Without commercial crew, NASA will be looking at dwindling opportunities for its astronaut cadre, which would send a negative signal to our nation's young people.

America can best reach its full potential in space by fully harnessing the innovation of U.S. industry. The Commercial Crew Program now represents NASA's primary means of access to Low Earth Orbit, and so it needs everyone's strong support in order to ensure that America remains a leader in human spaceflight. It is altogether fitting that the best way for America to retain its lead is to tap into a unique strength of America - namely, the entrepreneurial private-sector spirit that has defined this country for generations. The Commercial Crew program will also inspire our young people to pursue science and engineering careers in an innovative industry, promote American leadership in space and technology, and ensure continued access to, and utilization of, the International Space Station. If NASA is to remain the world leader and not keep buying rides from Russia, Commercial Crew needs to be strongly supported.

Sincerely,

Byron Lichtenberg (STS-9, STS-45)

Samuel Durrance (STS-35, STS-67)

George Nelson (STS-41-C, STS-61-C, STS-26)

Jeff Hoffman (STS-51-D, STS-35, STS-46, STS-61, STS-75)

Roger Crouch (STS-83, STS-94)

Terry Hart (STS-41-C)

Rick Searfoss (STS-58, STS-76, STS-90)

Larry DeLucas (STS-50)

Guy Gardner (STS-27, STS-35)

F. Andrew Gaffney, MD (STS-40)

Kathy Thornton (STS-33, STS-49, STS-61, STS-73)

William Pailes (STS-51-J)

Jay Buckey (STS-90)

Millie Hughes-Fulford (STS-40)

Charles Walker (STS-41-D, STS-51-D, STS-61-B)

Tom Hennen (STS-44)

Robert Cenker (STS-61-C)

Jim Voss (STS-44, STS-53, STS-69, STS-101, STS-102, Expedition 2, STS-105)

Buzz Aldrin (Gemini 12, Apollo 11)

Rusty Schweickart (Apollo 9)

Loren Acton (STS-51-F)

Steve Lindsey (STS-87, STS-95, STS-104, STS-121, STS-133)

Joe Allen (STS-5, STS-51-A)