U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES COMMITTEE ON
SCIENCE, SPACE, & TECHNOLOGY
Opening Statement

Chairwoman Eddie Bernice Johnson (D-TX)

Subcommittee on Space & Aeronautics Hearing:
Developing Core Capabilities for Deep Space Exploration: An Update on NASA's SLS, Orion, and Exploration Ground Systems
Wednesday, September 18, 2019

Good morning and welcome to our witnesses.

I want to thank Subcommittee Chairwoman Horn for holding today's hearing on NASA's Space Launch System, Orion crew vehicle, and Exploration Ground Systems, which are essential elements of the nation's human exploration program.

I also want to echo Chairwoman Horn's comment about the lateness of NASA's testimony. NASA was provided ample advance notice of this hearing and more than sufficient time to prepare testimony and have it reviewed by OMB and whomever else looks over NASA's testimony these days. The fact that this testimony is overdue is not only frustrating, it leaves Members little opportunity to consider NASA's testimony in advance of the hearing. If NASA and the Administration can't meet simple hearing deadlines, it doesn't inspire great confidence in their ability to meet the much harder deadline of landing astronauts on the Moon by 2024.

Turning to the focus of this hearing, we are going to need SLS, Orion, and the associated ground systems if we are going to send our astronauts to worlds beyond our own, whether it's the Moon, Mars or other destinations. We need to be sure they are developed efficiently and are well managed. I certainly want this nation to explore deep space with humans once again, and I think that is a sentiment shared by Members on both sides of the aisle. However, having recently reflected on the 50th anniversary of Apollo 11, it's clear that we need to do it right—safely, sustainably, and affordably.

That's not an easy task. The Apollo program was aggressive and bold, but it also featured extensive testing, the efforts of hundreds of thousands of dedicated civil servants and contractors, relative budgetary stability, and an effective organizational structure led by experienced engineers and program managers. It also had the benefit of an extensive series of Mercury and Gemini precursor missions that helped mature the design and operational techniques used in the Apollo program. As I look at the few details that are available on the Trump Administration's 2024 Moon landing initiative, the contrast with Apollo is striking and troubling.

It has been 47 years since we sent astronauts beyond low Earth orbit. It has been almost a decade since an American spacecraft sent astronauts into space at all. Yet the Administration's plan requires our astronauts to attempt a lunar landing on only the second crewed flight beyond low Earth orbit after what by then will have been a 50-year hiatus, with no real plans for prior crewed preparatory flights in low Earth orbit. And based on the information available to date, that landing attempt could also be the first flight of the lunar landing and ascent vehicles and transfer vehicle. That is, the schedule doesn't appear to baseline any test flights prior to the first crewed lunar landing attempt. That first lunar landing attempt will also be the first crewed visit to the Gateway. There will be no prior crewed visits to the Gateway to check it out before using it to initiate the lunar landing attempt.

And under current plans, it looks like the Administration is proposing to have the set of three lunar landing system vehicles—vehicles that do not yet exist either in government or in the private sector—be provided for NASA's use under a fixed price commercially-provided service. That is, the government would not own them or have any significant oversight of their development. And all of this would have to happen by 2024.

Moreover, it has now been more than two months since the head of the NASA Human Exploration and Operations Directorate was removed from his position, with no permanent replacement yet identified—even though that position is critical to the success of NASA's Exploration and ISS programs. And we have been told not to expect a cost estimate or budget plan for the President's Moon program before next year.

I could go on, but I hope my point is clear. Rhetoric about American leadership in space and advancing the role of women in spaceflight is all well and good, but it is not a substitute for a well planned, well managed, well funded, and well executed exploration program. To date, Congress has not been given a credible basis for believing that the President' Moon 2024 program satisfies any of those criteria. In short, if Congress is to support such a program, the Administration is going to have to do a lot more to provide such evidence.

I again want to welcome our witnesses, and I look forward to your testimony. With that, I yield back the balance of my time.