

Opening Statement
Ranking Member Donna F. Edwards
Subcommittee on Space
Committee on Science, Space, and Technology
Joint Hearing of the Space and Research Subcommittees:
Exoplanet Discoveries: Have We Found Other Earths?

May 9, 2013

Good afternoon and welcome to our distinguished panel of witnesses.

The news coming out of NASA a few weeks ago was both surprising yet not unexpected. NASA's Kepler space telescope had found Earth-sized and super-Earth sized planets. That was not unexpected as Kepler is doing a fantastic job at discerning these faint objects.

What was tantalizing is that this particular detection included three super-Earth-size planets in the "habitable zone," the range of distance from a star where the surface temperature of an orbiting planet might be suitable for liquid water to exist.

I say tantalizing because this finding means we are making progress in answering the fundamental questions of where do we come from and whether we are alone in the Universe. NASA and the National Science Foundation have exciting exoplanet research both underway and planned that will help us gain further insight into those questions.

Unfortunately, as we will hear this morning, addressing those questions will take time and resources; two things that are hard to come by in this difficult budgetary environment.

In particular, NASA is somewhat hamstrung in starting a new large mission in astrophysics until it is closer to launching the James Webb Space Telescope, currently slated for 2018. And NSF's ability to support a growing number of grant requests focused on exoplanet research is threatened by relatively flat funding and the need to maintain currently operating facilities.

I hope that today's hearing will shed light on the exciting potential of NASA and NSF exoplanet activities as well as the challenges these agencies face in getting there.