

OPENING STATEMENT

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Subcommittee on Space
Committee on Science, Space, and Technology

Exploration of the Solar System: From Mercury to Pluto and Beyond
Full Committee Hearing

July 28, 2015

Good morning. I want to join the Chairman in welcoming our witnesses to today's hearing. We have a distinguished panel, and I look forward to your testimony.

Mr. Chairman, we live in extraordinary times. The successful flyby of Pluto just two weeks ago and the announcement last week that an Earth-like planet had been discovered in the "habitable zone" of another star's solar system are just the most recent examples of the tremendous accomplishments that have been made in planetary science and space exploration in recent years.

And it's notable that all of the solar system exploration missions that NASA has undertaken over the past half-century have raised as many exciting new research questions as they have answered. That is the nature of space exploration, and why it is so important for this nation to continue to support it.

The New Horizons mission to Pluto is also a reminder of how challenging solar system missions really are. The 9 year flight to Pluto was preceded by years of design and engineering work to produce the spacecraft and instruments and the trajectory that made New Horizons a success.

I want to salute the entire New Horizons team for their dedication and hard work over those many years.

I'm sure Dr. Stern will have more to say about the work that went into making the mission a success, but I would like to note the significant role played by Dr. Tom Krimigis and the Maryland-based Johns Hopkins Applied Physics Laboratory in the development and execution of the New Horizons spacecraft and mission. They and the entire Pluto mission team can take pride in what has been accomplished.

Mr. Chairman, this nation is making great progress in the exploration of our solar system. However, that progress has been made possible in large part by the investments in technology development that our predecessors had the foresight to fund.

It is now our turn as Members of Congress to show the same vision, and I hope that we will by the time this year's funding battles get resolved. We owe it to the dedicated scientists and engineers represented here today to do so. Yet progress in solar system exploration is not just a question of funding. Those funds will need to be invested judiciously to ensure that NASA has the right technological capabilities in the years ahead.

In addition, there will need to be clear and thoughtful prioritization of research objectives, because there really is an "embarrassment of riches" when it comes to exciting new potential mission concepts. That is where the Decadal Surveys of the National Academies can continue to play a very useful role.

As Members of Congress, we all may have our own favorite destinations and missions, but it is important that the scientific community be able to determine priorities that address the most compelling scientific questions while ensuring that the planetary science program maintains an appropriate balance across research fields.

In the meantime, today's hearing is a wonderful opportunity to hear about some of the exciting results from missions now underway as well as those being contemplated, and I can't wait to hear from our witnesses.

Thank you, and I yield back.