

MISSION ABORTED:

How NASA Illegally Implemented the President's Budget Request Without Congressional Approval



Minority Staff Report

Prepared for Members of the Committee on Science, Space, and Technology

U.S. House of Representatives

April 2026



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Executive Summary

In 2025, NASA implemented the President's Budget Request for Fiscal Year 2026 instead of the laws duly enacted by Congress. NASA leaders denied this fact repeatedly during the summer and fall of 2025. But the evidence gathered by Committee Staff says otherwise. Without authorization or direction from Congress, and in violation of the basic separation-of-powers framework set forth by the Constitution, NASA put into effect an executive branch proposal as if it were the law of the land. The consequences of that decision – for the agency, its workforce, and American leadership in science and space – were adverse to the agency's mission.

Democratic Committee Staff with the Committee on Science, Space, and Technology (Science Committee) began to receive reports that NASA was actively implementing the President's Budget Request for Fiscal Year 2026 (FY26 PBR), which proposed a 24% cut to the agency's overall budget and a 47% cut to its Science budget, almost immediately upon its public release in May 2025. We gathered evidence of these activities over the remainder of 2025 and early months of 2026. This staff report provides an overview of that evidence and highlights three case studies that demonstrate the damage NASA inflicted upon itself by yielding to pressure from the White House Office of Management and Budget (OMB) instead of following the law. The report is not meant to be an exhaustive compilation of the impacts experienced by NASA in 2025, nor does it encompass all of the information gathered by Committee Staff regarding programs, missions, offices, and Centers that were harmed by the agency's decision to implement the FY26 PBR. Far from it. This report is merely intended to establish a single crucial fact: the agency elevated a presidential proposal over the law, with real-world effects that were immediate, far-reaching, and destructive.

The key findings of the report include:

- **In 2025, NASA acted in concrete and formal ways to implement the proposals of the FY26 PBR.**
- **The orders to implement the FY26 PBR were issued directly by the agency's senior political appointees, including then-Chief of Staff Brian Hughes and then-Senior Advisor to the Administrator Ryan Whitley.** In a June 2025 meeting among senior NASA officials, Hughes responded to a question about the immediate implementation of the FY26 PBR by directly telling other senior officials: "Yes, you should assume that is what you will be doing." In an audio recording of another meeting in the summer of 2025, which was obtained by Committee Staff, Whitley told other senior NASA officials that "it's always been the plan to move out on a spend plan," referring to the agency's decision to adopt the FY26 PBR as its own spending plan.

- **Numerous whistleblowers throughout the agency disclosed to Committee Staff that they had been explicitly told by their management, or had observed firsthand, that the FY26 PBR was being implemented.** For example, one source recounted communication from their management that the passage of a Continuing Resolution in the fall of 2025 meant they were “aligned with the PBR at least until January.” Another source disclosed that in September 2025, at a staff meeting in NASA HQ, a senior official in NASA’s Science Mission Directorate (SMD) told SMD staffers that they were expressly barred from communicating with the Goddard Space Flight Center about Goddard’s intention to implement the FY26 PBR.
- **NASA canceled the Electrified Powertrain Flight Demonstration (EPFD) project on the very same day that the full FY26 PBR was released.** The formal reason given for the cancellation was that EPFD was zeroed out in the FY26 PBR. In a May 30th email, which was obtained by Committee Staff, the Project Manager for EPFD wrote to the project’s employees: “I am the bearer of sad news. The President’s budget and OMB have zeroed out EPFD for FY26 and beyond. The Agency has requested an orderly shutdown of our Project by September 30th.” EPFD’s contracts were then terminated, and its staff were assigned elsewhere or left the agency altogether. NASA was forced to revive EPFD in 2026 after Congress provided funding for it, but due to the project’s disruption, one of the two aircraft under development will not fly and the agency will obtain far more limited data from the other one than previously planned.
- **NASA’s Goddard Space Flight Center fatally undermined the Advanced X-ray Imaging Satellite (AXIS) mission after its mission class was proposed for cancellation in the FY26 PBR.** AXIS competed and won funding to execute a concept study phase in 2025. In the months after the release of the FY26 PBR, Goddard management restricted funding for AXIS, reassigned most Goddard engineers away from AXIS, and refused to allow AXIS to plan for the use of any Goddard resources after September 30th, the end of the fiscal year. The reason provided for these decisions was that the budget line for the AXIS mission class was zeroed out in the FY26 PBR. In a September 8th email, which was obtained by Committee Staff, the principal investigator for AXIS formally notified Goddard leadership that the Center’s actions were placing AXIS in a position that was “simply not viable” as long as Goddard leadership was “unable to describe any plans for the early FY26 period.” Goddard’s decisions caused AXIS to submit a mission proposal that failed to comply with cost and schedule requirements, leading to the proposal’s rejection by NASA HQ in early 2026.

- **NASA eliminated the Joint Agency Satellite Division (JASD) after the FY26 PBR called for the end of NASA's role as the acquisition agent for NOAA's satellite programs.** JASD provided programmatic expertise and independent oversight for the NASA-NOAA acquisition relationship from the level of NASA HQ. Within two months of the release of the FY26 PBR, the office's staff learned that it would be disbanded. The decision was made, according to a source, to "satisfy OMB." Half of JASD's employees quickly left the agency while the remainder were reassigned elsewhere within NASA. In an August 12th internal NASA memorandum that formalized the elimination of JASD, which was obtained by Committee Staff, NASA acknowledged that the rationale for disbanding JASD was to be "responsive to Administration direction" and to "address an Administration direction to NOAA."

These case studies represent only a portion of the damage sustained at NASA due to the agency's implementation of the FY26 PBR. Similar impacts to the ones detailed in this report can be traced throughout the agency, wherever programmatic activities targeted by OMB were found. It was a damaging chapter in NASA's history. And it was a chapter that should never have been written at all. In January 2026, Congress - the rightful author of NASA's future - rendered its verdict on the PBR by enacting a new appropriations law that rejected almost all of the proposed cuts to NASA. Congress had spoken, but due to the agency's unilateral actions, irrevocable damage had already been done.

The brilliant triumph of Artemis II shows what is at stake. NASA is an agency capable of inspiring the world. Unfortunately, the threat of the PBR remains. A new Presidential Budget Request for Fiscal Year 2027 was released on April 3rd, and it is just as bad as the previous one. Yet agency leadership has changed since the dark days of 2025. Administrator Jared Isaacman now bears responsibility for NASA. He must follow the law, defend the agency, and protect NASA from OMB, as well as any other political actors who seek to coerce the agency into defying the will of Congress. If NASA leadership does not assert itself, history may well repeat, with adverse consequences for American leadership in space.

President's Budget: Disposition of EPFD Project

[REDACTED] (LARC-E1A)(Consolidated Program Support Services)

To: LARC-DL-EPFD-Team

☺ Reply Reply all Forward ☰ ...

Fri 5/30/2025 2:30 PM

Hello EPFDers,

Gaudy asked me to send everyone the message below.

Dear EPFD Family,

I am the bearer of sad news. The President's budget and OMB have zeroed out EPFD for FY26 and beyond.

The Agency has requested an orderly shutdown of our Project by September 30th. A skeleton crew may be needed in the 1Q of FY26 to complete closeout.

Some key messages that you need to take to heart:

- ALL of you are amazing people who have done an exceptional job implementing the EPFD objectives.
- YOU ALL should hold your heads up high.. We need to take with us all that we have accomplished, the friendships we have made, the profound ways we have changed
- Know that through your efforts aircraft electrification is closer to being a reality
- We will be observers to this new era but know that we were the pioneers

The F2F is still on for next week. We will be revising the agenda to reflect our new direction.

IASP plans to address the Project on Thursday morning. We will send an invite to all.

Watch your outlook for a possible ARMD all hands for Monday afternoon, 3-4 p.m.

Talk soon,

Gaudy

NASA's Implementation of the FY26 PBR: An Overview

2025 was a trying year for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). The first days of President Trump's second term unleashed policies that threw the agency into chaos. Individuals associated with the so-called "Department of Government Efficiency" (DOGE) arrived at NASA and quickly froze payments, terminated contracts, and terrified the agency workforce with the threat of mass firings and arbitrary office closures.¹ Agency research grant programs were paused, and early career fellowship programs were suspended.² Under pressure from DOGE and OMB, NASA initiated a Reduction in Force (RIF) that eliminated the agency's Office of Chief Scientist (OCS) and Office of Technology, Policy, and Strategy (OTPS), resulting in the removal of the NASA Chief Scientist, Chief Technologist, and Chief Economist, along with additional employees from the Office of Equal Opportunity (OEO).³ NASA oversaw two rounds of the Deferred Resignation Program (DRP), which encouraged civil servants to resign from the agency in exchange for several months' worth of salary and caused a loss of talent and experience in key roles throughout the agency.⁴ The DRP, along with a governmentwide hiring freeze and other early retirement and voluntary separation programs, eventually pushed nearly 4,000 employees to quit the agency, reducing the overall NASA civil servant workforce by roughly 20% in a wave of indiscriminate departures lacking any semblance of coherent vision or strategic planning.⁵ It was a low point in the history of one of America's proudest federal agencies, characterized by poor morale, diminished capacity, and politicization at the highest levels of agency decision-making.

But even amidst the disarray of 2025, perhaps no single attack on NASA epitomized the Trump Administration's contempt for the agency quite so well as the budget. The President's Budget Request for Fiscal Year 2026 (FY26 PBR) was a catastrophic document for NASA, both for the hypothetical vision it championed and for the all-too-real consequences that resulted from its publication. The FY26 PBR proposed an enormous 24% cut to NASA's overall budget from the agency's enacted full-year

¹ Joey Roulette, "Acting NASA chief says DOGE to review space agency spending as hundreds take buyout," *Reuters*, February 13th, 2025, accessed here: <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/acting-nasa-chief-says-doge-plans-examine-space-agencys-spending-2025-02-12/>; Hannah Richter, "Confusion and worry as DOGE cuts hit NASA," *Science*, March 27th, 2025, accessed here: <https://www.science.org/content/article/confusion-and-worry-doge-cuts-hit-nasa>.

² Christopher Cokinos, "Space scientists fearful as Trump administration targets science and mulls NASA cuts," *Astronomy*, March 16th, 2025, accessed here: <https://www.astronomy.com/space-exploration/space-scientists-fearful-as-trump-administration-targets-science-and-mulls-nasa-cuts/>.

³ Kenneth Chang, "NASA Eliminates Chief Scientist and Other Jobs at its Headquarters," *New York Times*, March 10th, 2025, accessed here: <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/10/science/nasa-chief-scientist-fired-katherine-calvin.html>.

⁴ Mike Wall, "NASA losing nearly 4,000 employees to Trump Administration's 'deferred resignation' program," *Space*, July 26th, 2025, accessed here: <https://www.space.com/space-exploration/nasa-losing-nearly-4-000-employees-to-trump-administrations-deferred-resignation-program>.

⁵ Sana Pashankar, "NASA Starts Recruiting Drive After Cutting Workforce in 2025," *Bloomberg*, March 4th, 2026, accessed here: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2026-03-04/nasa-starts-recruiting-drive-after-musk-s-doge-thinned-agency>.

continuing resolution for Fiscal Year 2025.⁶ NASA science and research fared even worse: the FY26 PBR proposed a 47% cut to the Science Mission Directorate (SMD),⁷ including a 53% proposed cut to the agency's Earth Science budget, a 66% proposed cut to the agency's Astrophysics budget, and a 46% proposed cut to the agency's Heliophysics budget.⁸ Large cuts were also proposed for directorates focused on Aeronautics (37%) and Space Technology (48%), while the budget for the agency's STEM Engagement office was eliminated entirely in a proposed 100% cut.⁹ Beyond the numbers, the FY26 PBR launched a rhetorical broadside against NASA, accusing the agency of promoting "low-priority climate monitoring satellites," "failing space propulsion projects," "climate-focused 'green aviation' spending," and "woke STEM programming and research that prioritizes some groups of students over others," among other attacks.¹⁰ The publication of the FY26 PBR left no doubt about where the White House - and specifically OMB, as the author of the budget request - stood in regards to NASA. The agency's budget and mission were under attack.

It is hard to overstate the damage that the FY26 PBR proposed to inflict upon NASA. The funding cuts contained within the budget request, if enacted into law, signified nothing less than the end of American ambition in space. NASA's scientific research would have been damaged beyond recognition. Dozens of missions and programs would have been zeroed out and canceled, including ongoing science missions like the Chandra X-ray Observatory and Fermi, along with the next generation of groundbreaking scientific missions such as the Geospace Dynamics Constellation, DAVINCI, and all four decadal Earth Science Observatory missions.¹¹ Thousands more employees - brilliant scientists and engineers, civil servants, senior leaders and junior staffers alike - would have been forced out of the agency's workforce, a brain drain with generational repercussions for the country. The agency's ability to achieve big things, to push scientific and technological boundaries and inspire the imaginations of people around the globe, would have been grievously compromised. The FY26 PBR was a formula for ceding American leadership in space, with all the resulting geopolitical, economic, scientific, and cultural consequences that would ensue.

And it was immediately recognized as such, sparking passionate opposition from stakeholders who understood the importance of NASA science for the country and the world. The American Astronomical Society labeled the FY26 PBR an "existential

⁶ White House Office of Management and Budget, "Fiscal Year 2026 Discretionary Budget Request," May 2nd, 2025, accessed here: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Fiscal-Year-2026-Discretionary-Budget-Request.pdf>.

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ Roohi Dalal, "The FY 26 President's Budget Request: NASA and NSF Details," *American Astronomical Society*, June 5th, 2025, accessed here: <https://aas.org/posts/news/2025/06/fy26-presidents-budget-request>.

⁹ White House Office of Management and Budget, "Fiscal Year 2026 Discretionary Budget Request," May 2nd, 2025, accessed here: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Fiscal-Year-2026-Discretionary-Budget-Request.pdf>.

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ NASA, "Fiscal Year 2026 Budget Technical Supplement," June 9th, 2025, accessed here: <https://www.nasa.gov/fy-2026-budget-request/>.

threat” and declared that “if cuts of this magnitude [to NASA and other federal science agencies] were to be enacted by Congress later this year, it would be disastrous for the US scientific community.”¹² The American Geophysical Union stated that the funding levels of the FY26 PBR would have “decimated our federal science agencies and harmed the larger scientific community.”¹³ The Commercial Space Federation criticized the FY26 PBR’s proposed budget cuts for causing “significant negative consequences for the U.S. global posture and the commercial space economy, particularly as China is quickly expanding their space activity and international outreach.”¹⁴ The Aerospace Industries Association expressed concern over the FY26 PBR’s “significant proposed cuts to civil space funding, particularly to key NASA spaceflight and science programs.”¹⁵ The Planetary Society excoriated the proposals within the FY26 PBR as an “extinction-level event” for NASA science.¹⁶ The rejection of the FY26 PBR from the scientific and space communities writ large was broad and overwhelming.

Congress agreed. After a lengthy appropriations process, Congress discarded the FY26 PBR’s proposed budget cuts for NASA and enacted an appropriations law in January 2026 that largely maintained the agency’s funding levels from the previous year.¹⁷ In the Fiscal Year 2026 Commerce-Justice-Science (CJS) appropriations law, Congress – with huge bipartisan majorities – approved NASA’s overall budget at a 1.6% reduction from the enacted level in Fiscal Year 2025.¹⁸ The funding reduction for SMD was even smaller at 1.1%.¹⁹ Congress completely ignored the Trump Administration’s proposed cuts of 53%, 66%, and 46% to NASA Earth Science, Astrophysics, and Heliophysics, instead limiting the Earth Science cut to 1.9% while enacting funding *increases* for Astrophysics and Heliophysics of 4.3%, and 8.7%, respectively. The FY26 CJS law was a resounding rejection of the Trump Administration’s attack on NASA and a reaffirmation of bipartisan congressional support for the agency.

¹² Colin Hamill, “The ‘Skinny’ President’s Budget Request for FY2026,” *American Astronomical Society*, May 2nd, 2025, accessed here: <https://aas.org/posts/news/2025/05/skinny-presidents-budget-request-fy2026>.

¹³ Brittany Webster, “Science Funding for FY26 Secured,” *American Geophysical Union*, February 5th, 2026, accessed here: <https://thebridge.agu.org/2026/02/05/science-funding-for-fy26-secured/>.

¹⁴ Commercial Space Federation, Press Release, May 5th, 2025, accessed here: https://commercialspace.org/news_events/csf-responds-to-proposed-nasa-budget/.

¹⁵ Aerospace Industries Association, Press Release, May 2nd, 2025, accessed here: <https://www.aia-aerospace.org/news/aia-statement-on-fy26-budget-request/>.

¹⁶ The Planetary Society, Press Release, May 30th, 2025, accessed here: <https://www.planetary.org/press-releases/the-planetary-society-reissues-urgent-call-to-reject-disastrous-budget-proposal-for-nasa>.

¹⁷ William J. Broad, “Congress Is Rejecting Trump’s Steep Budget Cuts to Science,” *New York Times*, January 10th, 2026, accessed here: <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/01/10/science/trump-science-budget-cuts-congress.html>.

¹⁸ Public Law No. 119-74, 119th Congress, accessed here: <https://www.congress.gov/bill/119th-congress/house-bill/6938/text>.

¹⁹ *Id.*

That should have been the end of the story for the FY26 PBR. Under Article I of the Constitution, Congress possesses the power of the purse.²⁰ It is Congress that determines federal funding, Congress that decides agency spending priorities, and Congress that directs agencies how they may and may not spend the funds that have been provided to them. A presidential budget request, by contrast, is merely a proposal. Its role is to advocate for the President's policy preferences in the congressional appropriations process and nothing more. It is a meaningless piece of paper as a matter of law, possessing no more legal authority than a press release or an opinion column. And so, after its thorough rejection by Congress, the FY26 PBR should have been consigned to its rightful place as an historical footnote.

It was not. Before Congress could act, NASA acted. Over the summer and fall of 2025, NASA caved to pressure from the White House to unilaterally implement the FY26 PBR, dismissing Congress as a co-equal branch of government and subverting the rightful flow of authority from legislative to executive branch. NASA elevated the inclinations of the president over the enacted laws governing the agency and proceeded as if presidential preferences were all that mattered in setting the course of America's civil space agency. The agency's actions contradicted statutory direction from Congress and violated the basic separation of powers framework that defines our constitutional system. Without input or approval from Congress, NASA acted to reshape the agency in ways that lacked authority and legitimacy but will prove difficult or impossible to reverse. And it did so in the dark, frequently without a paper trail, and usually without transparency or even rudimentary notification to Congress.

Science Committee Democrats fiercely objected to these developments in real time. On July 16th, 2025, as NASA's intentions started to become clear, Science Committee Ranking Member Zoe Lofgren and Space and Aeronautics Subcommittee Ranking Member Valerie Foushee sent a letter to the Interim Administrator at the time, Sean Duffy, declaring that the agency was attempting "to override Congress' rightful authority over NASA's budget" and warning the agency not to "implement funding cuts that were never enacted by Congress in order to 'align' the agency's present-day budget with the Trump Administration's slash-and-burn proposed budget for the next fiscal year."²¹ Ranking Member Foushee co-led a separate bipartisan letter to NASA two days later, signed by dozens of Representatives, opposing the FY26 PBR's proposed cuts to SMD and urging the agency "to ensure no actions are taken at NASA to implement the proposed funding cuts" during Fiscal Year 2025.²² Similar objections were raised beyond the Science Committee, including by Ranking

²⁰ Article I, *Constitution of the United States*, accessed here: <https://constitution.congress.gov/constitution/article-1/>.

²¹ Ranking Member Zoe Lofgren and Ranking Member Valerie Foushee, Letter to NASA Interim Administrator Sean Duffy, July 16th, 2025, accessed here: <https://democrats-science.house.gov/news/press-releases/committee-leaders-demand-nasa-cease-scheme-to-illegally-impound-fy25-funds-warn-of-losing-leadership-in-space>.

²² Ranking Member Valerie Foushee, et al, Letter to NASA Interim Administrator Sean Duffy, July 18th, 2025, accessed here: <https://foushee.house.gov/media/press-releases/ranking-member-foushee-sounds-the-alarm-over-nasa-science-cuts-threatening-us-leadership-in-space>.

Member Grace Meng of the House Appropriations Committee’s Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice, and Science,²³ and by Representatives Judy Chu and Don Bacon, the Co-Chairs of the Planetary Science Caucus.²⁴

In response to these warnings, NASA senior leaders repeatedly denied that any such actions were taking place and rejected the assertion that the agency was implementing the FY26 PBR on its own. Their denials were not true. Some of the evidence for the agency’s actions became public at the time, including the words of NASA’s own senior leaders in leaked audio from an agency town hall on June 25th.²⁵ Other evidence emerged through press accounts of actions being undertaken by the agency.²⁶ But the evidence presented in this report goes far beyond public information.

Whistleblowers from across the agency recounted to Committee Staff in no uncertain terms that they had been explicitly told, or had observed firsthand, that the agency was implementing the FY26 PBR. Committee Staff heard these accounts from credible sources within NASA again²⁷ and again²⁸ and again²⁹ and again³⁰ and again³¹ and again³² and again³³ and again³⁴ in the summer and fall of 2025. One source told Committee Staff that their program had been directed to “work to a plus-up” for the rest of 2025, meaning their programmatic activities would be funded at much lower FY26 PBR levels unless and until Congress provided funding above those levels. Another source told Committee Staff that their program was directed by management to make plans towards implementing the PBR after the end of the fiscal year, which required planning for the cancellation of multiple projects and missions. Yet another source told Committee Staff that their management had explicitly

²³ Ranking Member Grace Meng, Letter to NASA Interim Administrator Sean Duffy, July 10th, 2025, accessed here: <https://democrats-appropriations.house.gov/news/press-releases/meng-calls-out-trump-admins-lack-transparency-spending-demands-agencies-follow>.

²⁴ Representative Judy Chu and Representative Don Bacon, et al, Letter to House of Representatives Committee on Appropriations, September 15th, 2025, accessed here: <https://chu.house.gov/media-center/press-releases/rep-chu-bacon-lead-colleagues-urging-house-appropriators-explicitly>.

²⁵ Keith Cowing, “Audio From Today’s NASA Town Hall,” *NASA Watch*, June 25th, 2025, accessed here: <https://nasawatch.com/personnel-news/audio-from-todays-nasa-town-hall/>.

²⁶ Rebecca Hersher, “Why a NASA satellite that scientists and farmers rely on may be destroyed on purpose,” *NPR*, August 4th, 2025, accessed here: <https://www.npr.org/2025/08/04/nx-s1-5453731/nasa-carbon-dioxide-satellite-mission-threatened>; Eric Berger, “White House works to ground NASA science missions before Congress can act,” *Ars Technica*, July 1st, 2025, accessed here: <https://arstechnica.com/space/2025/07/trump-administration-moves-to-tighten-the-noose-around-nasa-science-missions/>; Josh Dinner, “NASA is sinking its flagship science center during the government shutdown – and may be breaking the law in the process, critics say,” *Space*, November 3rd, 2025, accessed here: <https://www.space.com/space-exploration/nasa-is-sinking-its-flagship-science-center-during-the-government-shutdown-and-may-be-breaking-the-law-in-the-process>.

²⁷ Whistleblower Disclosure, on file with the Committee, September 3rd, 2025.

²⁸ Whistleblower Disclosure, on file with the Committee, September 11th, 2025.

²⁹ Whistleblower Disclosure, on file with the Committee, September 17th, 2025.

³⁰ Whistleblower Disclosure, on file with the Committee, October 9th, 2025.

³¹ Whistleblower Disclosure, on file with the Committee, October 21st, 2025.

³² Whistleblower Disclosure, on file with the Committee, November 7th, 2025.

³³ Whistleblower Disclosure, on file with the Committee, November 16th, 2025.

³⁴ Whistleblower Disclosure, on file with the Committee, December 5th, 2025.

communicated to them that operating under a Continuing Resolution would mean their program was “aligned with the PBR at least until January.”

The orders were rarely delivered in writing, but they came straight from the top political leadership of the agency. Committee Staff have learned that in a June 2025 meeting among senior NASA officials, then-NASA Chief of Staff Brian Hughes was asked whether the agency would be implementing the FY26 PBR during Fiscal Year 2025. Hughes responded with a blunt command: “Yes, you should assume that is what you will be doing.” His command was echoed by Ryan Whitley, a second senior political appointee. In an audio recording of a different meeting in the summer of 2025, which was obtained by Committee Staff, Whitley - at that time a Senior Advisor to the NASA Administrator - confirmed to a group of senior NASA officials that political leadership at the agency was directing the implementation of the FY26 PBR before the end of the fiscal year. In the recording, senior officials explicitly discussed whether the FY26 PBR would need to be implemented immediately, even while NASA formally continued to operate under the appropriations law enacted for FY 2025. Whitley stated clearly: “I mean, it’s always been the plan to move out on a spend plan.” The spend plan, in this instance, referred to the adoption of the FY26 PBR as the agency’s own spending plan.

The cumulative weight of this evidence, in tandem with the agency’s official actions in the summer and fall of 2025, leaves little doubt about the larger picture. After the FY26 PBR was released, NASA senior leadership yielded to pressure from OMB and acted on its own to implement that proposed budget with dire results. But the big picture does not tell the full story, and broad statements do not fully convey the impacts that were felt as a result of the agency’s failure of leadership. The remainder of this report discusses three specific case studies: the Electrified Powertrain Flight Demonstration (EPFD) project; the Advanced X-Ray Imaging Satellite (AXIS) mission; and the Joint Agency Satellite Division (JASD). Their fates throw NASA’s implementation of the FY26 PBR into stark relief and highlight the costs to the agency and the nation that ensued.

Case Study #1: EPFD Derailed

NASA's Aeronautics Research Mission Directorate (ARMD) conducts research and development on aviation concepts and technologies to transform aviation by advancing safety, efficiency, and capabilities, often in close partnership with industry.³⁵ As global air travel increases and global aviation market competition intensifies, improving the efficiency of aviation operations is a high priority for government and industry R&D. Furthermore, the United States, along with the global aviation community, has committed to achieving net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. NASA and its partners have been pursuing this goal through a multi-pronged approach encompassing all components of the modern aviation system: airframe and engine performance, alternative fuel sources, and air traffic control and ground systems. One key area of focus has been advancing electric propulsion capabilities for the next generation of aircraft. NASA and industry are targeting Megawatt (MW)-class technologies for large regional turboprop and single-aisle aircraft.

On September 30th, 2021, NASA announced that it had selected two companies to cost-share in the Electrified Powertrain Flight Demonstration (EPFD) project to mature and demonstrate, in flight, MW-class hybrid electric aircraft propulsion systems.³⁶ NASA awarded \$179 million to GE Aviation and \$74.3 million to magniX USA for five-year agreements, under which they would perform integrated megawatt-class powertrain system ground and flight demonstrations in collaboration with NASA and other electric aircraft propulsion efforts at the agency. Over years of intense work by NASA and its industry partners, significant progress was made towards achieving the project's technical objectives. According to a July 2025 Assessment of Major NASA Projects report by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), EPFD had maintained the baselines established at confirmation of a total life-cycle cost of \$655 million, which included the work being performed by GE and magniX.³⁷

EPFD's support for the development and demonstration of electrified aircraft propulsion technologies was intended to boost the entire U.S. aviation sector and position the United States as a global industry leader in next-generation electric-powered aircraft and hybrid-electric flight systems. The project represented a public-private collaboration to bolster the profitability of American industry while advancing national priorities to reduce aviation fuel costs, reduce aviation sector greenhouse gas emissions, and strengthen America's competitive advantage in the global aviation market. No major technology demonstration project proceeds without challenges,

³⁵ Aeronautics Research Mission Directorate, NASA, accessed here: <https://www.nasa.gov/directorates/armd/>.

³⁶ NASA, "NASA Issues Contracts to Mature Electrified Aircraft Propulsion Technologies," Press Release, September 30th, 2021, accessed here: <https://www.nasa.gov/news-release/nasa-issues-contracts-to-mature-electrified-aircraft-propulsion-technologies/>.

³⁷ United States Government Accountability Office, "NASA: Assessments of Major Projects," GAO-25-107591, July 2025, accessed here: <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-25-107591.pdf>.

and EPFD was no different, with questions related to aggressive test schedules and technical maturation that still needed to be resolved.³⁸ But EPFD showed enormous promise through the spring of 2025. As the project approached its concluding stages, NASA and its industry partners were optimistic that the successful flight demonstration of novel hybrid electric aviation technologies was within reach. Then the FY26 PBR intervened.

From the very beginning, it was clear that OMB was targeting the EPFD project in the PBR. The initial “skinny budget” version of the PBR, released on May 2nd, included a thinly veiled attack on EPFD in the form of language that claimed the budget “eliminates climate-focused ‘green aviation’ spending” from the Aeronautics Directorate portfolio.³⁹ The full NASA Technical Supplement to the PBR was released on May 30th, and it confirmed the initial impression: OMB zeroed out proposed funding for the EPFD project in FY 2026 and subsequent years, declaring that EPFD was “proposed for cancellation in the FY 2026 budget.”⁴⁰ The PBR stated further that NASA would “discontinue funding” for the EPFD project and would “complete its work on and funding for the Electrified Powertrain Flight Demonstration (EPFD) project by the end of 2025.”⁴¹ It was not a subtle message. The White House wanted to kill the EPFD project, and it wanted to kill it quickly.

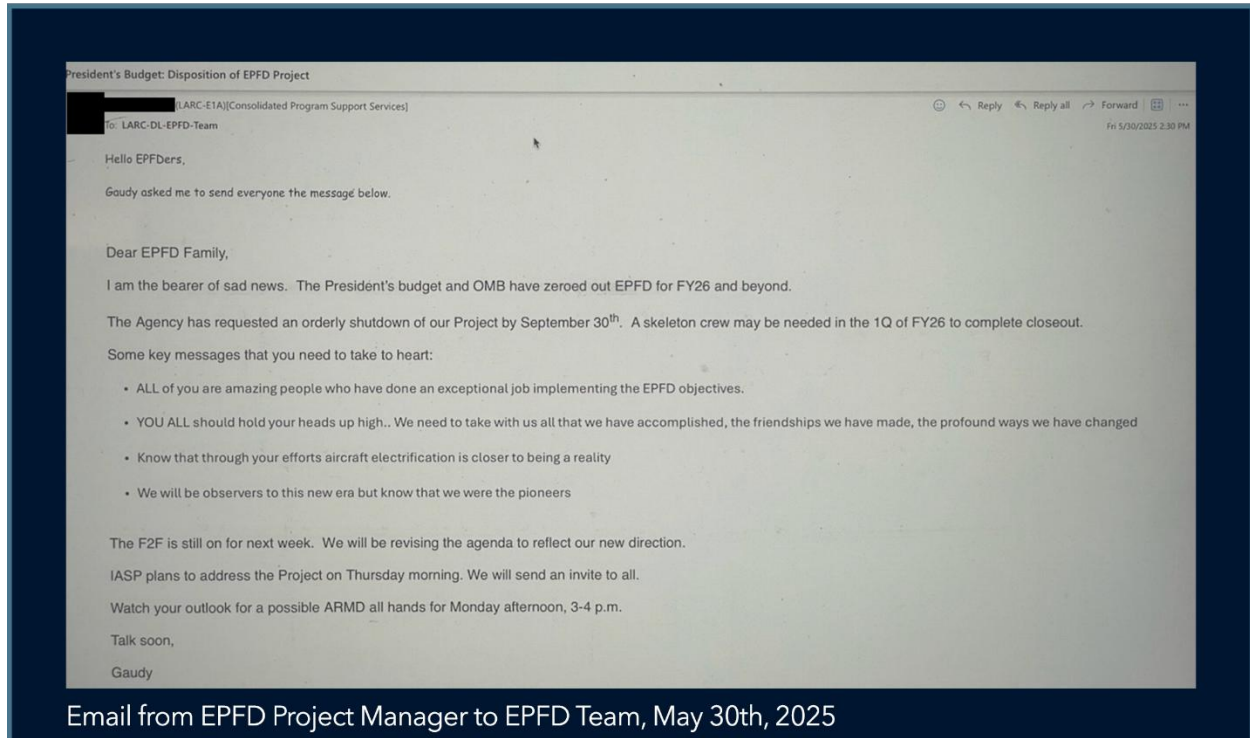
The reaction from NASA was instantaneous. On May 30th - *the very same day the FY26 PBR Technical Supplement was published* - NASA senior leadership ordered the swift cancellation of EPFD by the end of the fiscal year. The news was delivered to agency employees by EPFD Project Manager Gaudy Bezos-O’Connor. In her email, Ms. Bezos-O’Connor - clearly distraught over the sudden cancellation of the project - left no ambiguity regarding the cause of EPFD’s demise. She put it bluntly: “I am the bearer of sad news. The President’s budget and OMB have zeroed out EPFD for FY26 and beyond. The Agency has requested an orderly shutdown of our Project by September 30th.” The email’s subject title was “President’s Budget: Disposition of EPFD Project.” Committee Staff obtained the email:

³⁸ United States Government Accountability Office, “NASA: Assessments of Major Projects,” GAO-25-107591, July 2025, accessed here: <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-25-107591.pdf>.

³⁹ White House Office of Management and Budget, “Fiscal Year 2026 Discretionary Budget Request,” May 2nd, 2025, accessed here: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Fiscal-Year-2026-Discretionary-Budget-Request.pdf>.

⁴⁰ NASA, “Fiscal Year 2026 Budget Technical Supplement,” June 9th, 2025, accessed here: <https://www.nasa.gov/fy-2026-budget-request/>.

⁴¹ *Id.*



It is a sad email to read. The possibility of success was being abandoned, and NASA would not be allowed to complete its task. NASA is at its best when its workforce is empowered to pursue new frontiers of discovery. In this case, NASA senior leadership failed to defend its mission and relegated its team and the nation, in the words of Ms. Bezos-O'Connor, to be "observers" to a new era of electrified flight rather than "pioneers."

The fallout from NASA's decision to cancel EPFD was immediate. Sources disclosed to Committee Staff that within weeks of the Technical Supplement's publication on May 30th, formal close-out actions for the project began. From that point on, EPFD's primary focus was ending the project by the agency's target date of September 30th. NASA issued formal stop-work and termination notices for the two EPFD contracts with GE and magniX over the summer. An EPFD Close-Out Technical Interchange Meeting, which allowed agency experts to present their research and technical findings to industry partners and external stakeholders, was held from August 19th-21st. Most EPFD project meetings, both internally and externally, were canceled after that technical close-out meeting had concluded. An internal agency presentation from September 2025, a screenshot of which was provided to Committee Staff by a whistleblower, attributed the "Early close out" of EPFD to "PBR ARMD Project Changes":

PBR ARMD Project Changes (2/2)

Project	PBR Guidance	New Project	SLT-1 Status
IASP			
FDC	No Change include EPFD Close-out		
SFD	Descope		
LBFD	No Change		
EPFD	Early close out		
TACP			
TTT	Reformulation	Revolutionary Engineering Method	Formulation
CAS	Cancelled		
UI	No Change		
WF Reshaping	FY26 ONLY		
AETC	No Change		

Internal NASA Presentation, PowerPoint Slide, September 2025

By September 30th, the end of Fiscal Year 2025, the EPFD project was effectively dead. The only ongoing activity at that time was the agency’s negotiation with GE and magniX regarding the close-out costs, including any potential termination liability costs, that NASA would be obligated to pay as compensation for the early termination of the contracts. Those costs could have been large; indeed, potentially larger than the cost to simply complete the program. A formal programmatic close-out meeting had not yet been held, but the vast majority of agency employees and contractors who had been assigned to EPFD were gone. Some were transferred elsewhere within the agency; others took the DRP or lost their jobs. For EPFD, the FY26 PBR was no mere proposal. NASA treated the request as law and acted accordingly.

The only reason EPFD still exists today, in any form, is because Congress then intervened to save it. But the project is now a far cry from what Congress intended it to be. And NASA’s actions in this instance were especially outrageous because Congress’ support for EPFD was never in doubt. Congressional commitment to EPFD was longstanding, clearly communicated, and reaffirmed as recently as the summer of 2025. Indeed, at the very moment that Congress was demonstrating its durable support for EPFD, NASA was moving unilaterally to dismantle it.

Congress had consistently funded EPFD for years. In the Fiscal Year 2024 CJS law, the most recent full CJS appropriations enacted by Congress before the FY26 CJS, an accompanying Joint Explanatory Statement expressed Congress' desire to "encourage NASA to strengthen its collaborations with the Department of Energy, national laboratories, and universities to overcome energy storage challenges for mobility technologies such as electric air flight including through the Electrified Powertrain Flight Demonstration project."⁴² The FY24 Joint Explanatory Statement also explicitly adopted the language from an earlier Senate Appropriations report pertaining to "Sustainable Aviation," which had declared: "The Committee supports NASA's Sustainable Flight National Partnership, including the Sustainable Flight Demonstrator project, the Electrified Powertrain Flight Demonstration, and the advancement of sustainable aviation fuels."⁴³ This was the most recent congressional direction in appropriations law that NASA had received for EPFD.

Much had changed by the summer of 2025, but bipartisan congressional support for EPFD had not. In a July 2025 report accompanying its version of the FY26 CJS bill, the House Appropriations Committee provided "\$40,000,000 for a project to conduct ground and flight tests of hybrid and electrified aircraft propulsion technologies for the advancement of a new generation of domestic aircraft. Given international interest and competition, advancements in this area are critical for the future success of the domestic propulsion industrial base and maintaining American leadership in aerospace."⁴⁴ The House Appropriations Committee directed NASA to complete the initiative in Fiscal Year 2026. At virtually the same moment, in July 2025, the Senate Appropriations Committee issued its own report for its version of the FY26 CJS bill, which explicitly declared: "The Committee continues to support NASA's efforts to develop advanced propulsion technologies including sustainable aviation fuels, the Subsonic Flight Demonstrator project, the Electrified Powertrain Flight Demonstrator [EPFD], and compact core."⁴⁵ Unsurprisingly, the Joint Explanatory Statement accompanying the final FY26 CJS law enacted by Congress in January 2026 embraced this position, expressly providing \$40 million for the EPFD project and adopting the House Appropriations language elaborating on the purpose of the program.⁴⁶

It was absolutely clear over the summer of 2025 that Congress wanted EPFD to continue and to succeed. Congress signaled its intent unambiguously through the

⁴² Congressional Record, United States Senate, March 5th, 2024, accessed here:

<https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CREC-2024-03-05/pdf/CREC-2024-03-05-pt1-PgS1223.pdf>.

⁴³ United States Senate Committee on Appropriations, Report to Accompany S. 2321, July 13th, 2023, accessed here: <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CRPT-118srpt62/pdf/CRPT-118srpt62.pdf>.

⁴⁴ United States House of Representatives Committee on Appropriations, Report to Accompany FY26 CJS Bill, July 2025, accessed here: <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/AP/AP00/20250910/118544/HMKP-119-AP00-20250910-SD002.pdf>.

⁴⁵ United States Senate Committee on Appropriations, Report to Accompany S. 2354, July 17th, 2025, accessed here: https://www.appropriations.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/fy26_cjs_senate_report.pdf.

⁴⁶ Joint Explanatory Statement, FY26 Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Agencies, H.R. 6938, January 8th, 2026, accessed here: https://www.appropriations.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/fy26_cjs_jes.pdf.

appropriations process. But that did not appear to matter to NASA, because the FY26 PBR said otherwise. So, while Congress legislated, NASA circumvented the law and took matters into its own hands to cancel the project before Congress could stop it. By the time Congress was ready to act, NASA had taken irreversible steps that flatly contradicted congressional intent and undermined the goals for EPFD that Congress had sought to pursue.

The congressional directive to provide \$40 million for EPFD's budget in Fiscal Year 2026 created a dilemma for NASA. The agency was now required, by law, to fund the project and to attempt to complete it by the end of September 2026. But reviving a canceled project is not so easily done. As noted previously, contract terminations had been issued, agency employees had been reassigned, and internal agency work had been wrapped up. The damage was done; EPFD could not be resuscitated in the same form simply because the law required it. Committee Staff understand that since the passage of the FY26 CJS, NASA has scrambled to reconstruct some form of EPFD that will allow the agency to comply with the law. But the agency's new vision for EPFD falls far short of the ambition of the original project, and it is likely to result in far more limited benefits for NASA and the country.

Committee Staff have learned that one of the two EPFD hybrid electric aircraft, from the contractor magniX, will not fly due to the prior cutoff of NASA support. The agency's funding and the technical expertise of agency personnel were essential to the aircraft's viability. The ability to demonstrate an entire class of hybrid electric aviation technology is now lost to NASA and the country's domestic aviation sector as a result. NASA did manage to revive the other contract with GE, but with a sharply diminished scope. Committee Staff understand that the new contract will allow NASA to provide funding for GE's hybrid electric aircraft and to purchase raw flight performance data from the aircraft's demonstration. But the contract will not grant NASA further oversight beyond that raw data, and NASA will not obtain more detailed insights into the actual functionality of the aircraft's hybrid electric technology, which had been a longstanding agency objective for the EPFD project before it was prematurely terminated. Consequently, NASA's understanding of any hybrid electric aviation technology that emerges from this project will be far more limited than it would have been, and NASA's ability to publish research findings about the technology, to direct additional research funding into promising aspects of the technology, and to promote the domestic commercialization and adoption of the technology will be severely curtailed.

The only public acknowledgment of these changes thus far has come, ironically, in the FY27 PBR. The NASA Budget Estimate for the latest PBR, released on April 3rd, 2026, stated that EPFD would no longer be included in the agency's Major Program Annual Report (MPAR).⁴⁷ The agency's rationale for this change was oblique but telling: "The

⁴⁷ NASA, FY 2027 Budget Estimates, April 3rd, 2026, accessed here: <https://www.nasa.gov/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/fiscal-year-2027-full-budget-request.pdf?emrc=69cff43d9bcbb>. NASA is required by

Electrified Powertrain Flight Demonstrator (EPFD) project has been modified to a smaller scale flight test, per direction in FY 2026 Consolidated Appropriations to NASA (P.L. 119-74).⁴⁸ These words ring false. It was not Congress that directed changes to EPFD; it was OMB. NASA's decision to disregard Congress in the summer of 2025 and follow the PBR is the real reason for EPFD's diminished prospects. And EPFD is not mentioned anywhere else in the agency's FY27 budget proposal.

EPFD's outcome is a disappointing end to such a promising project. NASA will now see half the expected demonstration of hybrid electric aviation systems and receive far less insight into the technology that remains. It is a self-inflicted wound. NASA derailed its own project in its rush to comply with the FY26 PBR. The agency flouted congressional authority and wasted much of the precious taxpayer investment that had already been dedicated to the project. EPFD offered promising commercial applications through an approach that could have simultaneously promoted private sector interests and advanced broader national goals. Now those ambitions have been scaled back, and the United States risks falling behind its international competitors in the emerging sector of hybrid electric aviation. Those competitors, in countries like Canada⁴⁹ and France,⁵⁰ are not slowing down because of America's missteps. Aviation is a global market, and undermining American hybrid electric aviation while other countries race ahead is an opportunity lost for American manufacturing. This is not what Congress wanted. It is not how taxpayer dollars should be used. It is a concrete illustration of the cost that ensues when NASA erroneously follows presidential proposals rather than the law.

law to include all projects with lifecycle cost estimates over \$250 million in the MPAR. EPFD's lifecycle cost estimate was \$652.9 million prior to the release of the FY26 PBR.

⁴⁸ NASA, FY 2027 Budget Estimates, April 3rd, 2026, accessed here: <https://www.nasa.gov/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/fiscal-year-2027-full-budget-request.pdf?emrc=69cff43d9bcbb>.

⁴⁹ National Research Council of Canada, "Powering the next generation of electric aircraft," February 23rd, 2026, accessed here: <https://nrc.canada.ca/en/stories/powering-next-generation-electric-aircraft>.

⁵⁰ Charles Alcock, "French Partners Plan Hybrid-electric Genav Aircraft," *Aviation International News*, June 18th, 2025, accessed here: <https://www.ainonline.com/aviation-news/futureflight/2025-06-18/french-partnership-develop-hybrid-electric-propulsion>.

Case Study #2: AXIS Undermined

NASA's Astrophysics Division (APD) undertakes activities to advance our scientific understanding of how the universe began, how it evolved, and where life might exist beyond Earth.⁵¹ APD, located within NASA SMD, is guided by the community-consensus recommendations of the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine decadal surveys. The NASA Astrophysics mission portfolio includes principal investigator (PI)-led Small and Medium Explorer missions, which are competitively awarded and cost-capped around \$150-\$300 million; and flagship missions, which are strategic, large, agency-led missions that are highly complex, reflect the highest priority of the decadal surveys, and typically cost billions of dollars. The 2021 astrophysics decadal survey found that the large gap in cost and capability between Explorer missions and flagship missions was an impediment to achieving science priorities.⁵² The decadal recommended that NASA establish a new line of "probes," which would be once-per-decade, competitively awarded, PI-led missions solicited in priority areas with a cost cap of \$1.5 billion. The decadal recommended two priority areas for the Probe line in the 2020s: a far-infrared imaging or spectroscopy mission and an X-ray probe. Astrophysicists observe in multiple electromagnetic wavelengths, and they measure and observe in the X-ray wavelength to study some of the most energetic phenomena in the universe, such as supernovae or active supermassive black holes at the centers of galaxies. As envisioned by the decadal, an X-ray probe-class mission could address key decadal science questions: understanding the drivers of galaxy formation and evolution through observations of material entering supermassive black holes; searching for the universe's first black holes; and characterizing the activity of stars to study their evolution.

On July 31st, 2023, NASA issued the first Astrophysics Probe Explorer Announcement of Opportunity (AO).⁵³ The deadline for proposals was November 16th, 2023. Proposals would only be accepted in the two mission themes recommended by the decadal. The PI-managed mission cost cap was \$1 billion, and the mission had to be ready to launch no later than July 2032. As described in the AO, NASA would use a two-step selection process. After an initial evaluation of proposals, NASA would award funding to two or three proposals for the conduct of Phase A concept studies and the submission of a Concept Study Report (CSR) to NASA Headquarters (HQ), after which the agency would make a down-selection decision to proceed with one project.⁵⁴ On October 3rd, 2024, NASA announced the initial selection of two

⁵¹ Astrophysics Division, Science Mission Directorate, NASA, accessed here:

<https://science.nasa.gov/astrophysics/>.

⁵² National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, "Pathways to Discovery in Astronomy and Astrophysics for the 2020s," Consensus Study Report, 2023, accessed here: <https://doi.org/10.17226/26141>.

⁵³ NASA, Science Mission Directorate, 2023 Astrophysics Probe Explorer Announcement of Opportunity, July 31st, 2023, accessed here: <https://nspires.nasaprs.com/external/solicitations/summary/init.do?sollid={6069A30C-99DE-3647-6AF9-9D5646C9210A}>.

⁵⁴ NASA space flight projects and programs are managed through life cycles defined by several phases, with specific reviews and "decision gates" within and between the phases. In a two-step AO process, as in the case of

proposals: the Probe far-Infrared Mission for Astrophysics (PRIMA) and the Advanced X-ray Imaging Satellite (AXIS).⁵⁵ The AXIS and PRIMA teams were awarded \$5 million each to conduct a 12-month mission concept study, which would constitute the project's Phase A in the NASA space flight Formulation process.⁵⁶ Project management for AXIS would be led by the Goddard Space Flight Center (Goddard), while project management for PRIMA would be led by NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL). AXIS is the focus of this report.

The AXIS mission was still in this early concept study phase in the spring of 2025, and it was an ambitious and exciting scientific proposal. It carried immense potential to build on the legacy of the 20-year-old Chandra X-ray Observatory and was envisioned to advance the field of X-ray astronomy for an entire generation of astronomers. NASA's press release announcing that AXIS had been selected for additional review noted that a completed AXIS could "study the seeds of supermassive black holes; investigate the process of stellar feedback, which influences how galaxies evolve; and help determine the power sources of a variety of explosive phenomena in the cosmos."⁵⁷ Before May 2025, the evaluation process was proceeding as it typically did for NASA science projects: rigorously scientific and apolitical. But as with so much else inside NASA, the chaos of the second Trump Administration - and the arrival of the FY26 PBR - changed everything.

Committee Staff understand that Phase A proceeded without disruption for the AXIS mission through April 2025, and AXIS completed its mission design on schedule. Under typical circumstances for the development of a CSR, the completion of the mission design would have been followed by the drafting of mission cost and implementation schedules throughout the summer, which then would have been incorporated into the final CSR for submission to NASA HQ by the required deadline. It is a well-defined, resource-intensive, engineering-heavy process that calls upon the agency - in this case, through the Goddard Space Flight Center as the contractual partner for project management - to provide concept studies with the physical

the Astrophysics Probe Explorer AO, projects enter Phase A (Concept & Technology Development) after selection and are then down-selected after the evaluation of concept study reports. The down-selection serves as the decision gate (Key Decision Point B) to enter Phase B (Preliminary Design & Technology Completion), as described in NASA Procedural Requirement (NPR) 7120.5F. For more detail, see the NASA Space Flight Program and Project Management Handbook, accessed here:

https://nodis3.gsfc.nasa.gov/npg_img/N_PR_7120_005F_/N_PR_7120_005F_.pdf.

⁵⁵ NASA, "NASA Establishes New Class of Astrophysics Missions, Selects Studies," Press Release, October 3rd, 2024, accessed here: <https://www.nasa.gov/news-release/nasa-establishes-new-class-of-astrophysics-missions-selects-studies/>.

⁵⁶ NASA, "Criteria and Requirements for the Phase A Concept Study Report," 2023 Astrophysics Probe Explorer (APEX), December 17th, 2025, accessed here: https://explorers.larc.nasa.gov/2023APPROBE/pdf_files/FinalRevA_APEX_CandR_2025-12-17.pdf.

⁵⁷ NASA, "NASA Establishes New Class of Astrophysics Missions, Selects Studies," Press Release, October 3rd, 2024, accessed here: <https://www.nasa.gov/news-release/nasa-establishes-new-class-of-astrophysics-missions-selects-studies/>.

infrastructure, technical expertise, and management support they need to prepare high-quality proposals that adhere to NASA's cost and schedule requirements.⁵⁸

In the spring of 2025, Goddard turned that process upside down for AXIS. Some of the factors that contributed to the breakdown, such as the effects of the DRP, stemmed from the broader chaos overtaking the agency. The PI of the AXIS mission articulated those effects in a March 2026 email to the scientific community, including the fact that over 20 members of the AXIS team at Goddard took the DRP in the spring and early summer of 2025, including the AXIS Project Manager.⁵⁹ Other critical factors, however, were specific to AXIS, and they were rooted directly in the fact that OMB proposed to end AXIS immediately in the FY26 PBR.

As a mission in Phase A that was still subject to a down-selection, AXIS was not explicitly mentioned in the PBR. But there was no doubt that the PBR sought to end it. The NASA Technical Supplement to the FY26 PBR, which was released on May 30th, proposed to zero out the Astrophysics Explorer Future budget line where the Probe Explorer mission class was contained. The document stated explicitly that "NASA will not select an Astrophysics Probes mission" and that "this budget cancels funding for... Astrophysics Probes Future Missions" for FY26 and beyond.⁶⁰ By proposing the cancellation of the entire Probe Explorer mission class, OMB made clear that it opposed any effort by NASA to move forward with AXIS. The message was sent. Management at Goddard heard it loud and clear.

Committee Staff have learned that the FY26 PBR caused a dramatic and troubling shift in Goddard's treatment of AXIS. Sources disclosed that the AXIS mission "started to see the consequences of the project not being funded in the PBR" almost immediately after the FY26 PBR was released in May 2025. Committee Staff were told that in "meeting after meeting, conversation after conversation" with Goddard management, senior officials at Goddard repeatedly questioned whether AXIS could continue after being proposed for cancellation in the PBR. By June, Goddard officials were starting to use new terminology to describe the AXIS proposal. In what may have been an echo of the PBR – perhaps subconscious, perhaps not – Committee Staff have learned that Goddard officials began to openly refer to the need for AXIS to produce a "skinny CSR," meaning a more limited report that could be completed with reduced resources. The notion of a "skinny CSR" had no basis in formal NASA process and did not arise from any scientific or technical judgment. It represented a political decision by Goddard senior leaders to treat the FY26 PBR as official policy and put it into effect.

⁵⁸ NASA, "Project Phase A: Concept and Technology Development," accessed here:

<https://www.nasa.gov/reference/3-4-project-phase-a-concept-and-technology-development/>.

⁵⁹ Jeff Foust, "NASA disqualifies X-ray telescope from Probe mission competition," *Space News*, March 11th, 2026, accessed here: <https://spacenews.com/nasa-disqualifies-x-ray-telescope-from-probe-mission-competition/>.

⁶⁰ NASA, "Fiscal Year 2026 Budget Technical Supplement," June 9th, 2025, accessed here: <https://www.nasa.gov/fy-2026-budget-request/>.

Tangible consequences soon followed. Previously, AXIS had been utilizing Goddard internal discretionary funds called “bid and proposal” (B&P) funds as one of the primary funding sources to support its work. Within weeks of the PBR’s release, however, Committee Staff have learned that Goddard management began to limit the availability of these critical B&P funds for AXIS, and the funds remained restricted for the rest of the year. The AXIS team was also told explicitly in meetings with Goddard senior management that the Goddard Engineering and Technology Directorate (Goddard ETD) intended to shift engineers away from AXIS and assign them *exclusively* to projects proposed for funding in the FY26 PBR before the end of Fiscal Year 2025. While AXIS did not end up losing every Goddard engineer from its team, information obtained by Committee Staff shows that the mission did lose most of its engineering support over the summer of 2025 and beyond. Nearly all of the discipline engineers assigned to AXIS were transferred to other projects, and the team’s instrument system engineers had their project time allocation drastically reduced. A CSR is fundamentally an engineering study, and this loss of engineering expertise dealt a difficult blow to AXIS’s ability to meet project deadlines and successfully complete its work.

More disruption was to come. Committee Staff have learned that as the end of the fiscal year approached in August and September, Goddard informed AXIS that the mission would not be able to plan for the use of any Goddard resources beyond September 30th, including B&P funds, engineering personnel, and laboratory facilities, *because of the FY26 PBR*. This directive had a paralyzing effect on the ability of the AXIS team to plan for the remainder of the CSR. The principal investigator for AXIS reached out to Goddard management to ask for help. In an email on September 8th, 2025, which was obtained by Committee Staff, the AXIS PI wrote to Goddard officials that “the notion of having the team ‘run at full speed’ towards 1-October without some kind of Center planning for what lies beyond is simply not viable.” After laying out the damaging consequences of being unable to plan for Goddard resources beyond October 1st, the PI requested that Goddard formally document its plans and resource commitments to AXIS for the start of Fiscal Year 2026. He concluded with a direct statement: “If the GSFC Leadership is truly unable to describe any plans for the early FY26 period, we must conclude that the agency has put the Center in a position where they are currently unable to effectively serve as the AXIS Managing Center.” A screenshot of the email is presented below:

Request for plans/commitments beyond 1-Oct

Christopher S. Reynolds [REDACTED]

Mon, Sep 8, 2025 at 8:16 AM

To: "Hill-Kittle, Joanne E (She, Her, hers) (GSFC-5000)" [REDACTED], "Amato, Deborah A. (GSFC-1010)" [REDACTED]

Erin Kara [REDACTED], "Petre, Robert (GSFC-6600)" [REDACTED]

[REDACTED], "Ptak, Andrew (GSFC-6620)" [REDACTED]

Dear Joe

To follow-up on our last PIPR, I want to stress again the damage that the uncertainties at GSFC are having on the AXIS Phase A study and CSR preparation. We have an incredible team at GSFC who have been developing the AXIS design and working towards the CSR. They have worked with amazing professionalism in difficult times, but the DRP losses have already stressed them to the extreme and slowed progress on the essentials of mission formulation and CSR preparation.

And now moving forward, the notion of having the team "run at full speed" towards 1-October without some kind of Center planning for what lies beyond is simply not viable. In addition to the impact on team morale (which is not to be understated), we are facing imminent and critical strategic decisions that cannot be made without a notion of what may lie beyond 1-Oct. To give just three examples - (i) can we reopen any aspects of our design to mitigate cost issues without knowing whether we'll have engineering support long enough to close it again? (ii) how do I allocate the remaining AXIS Phase A funds when I have no idea of the holes that we'll need to backfill come 3 weeks from now? (iii) how do we prioritize the time of the proposal preparation staff when we don't know whether they will be available to us after 1-October? I genuinely appreciate the situation that the Center finds itself in, but the AXIS team and partners (who are making significant investments of their own resources) deserve more clarity from our Managing Center.

That brings me to my request - please consider this a formal request from the AXIS PI to the Center Director and Senior Leadership at GSFC.

There are clearly three main scenarios that we'll be facing on the 1-October regarding the Astrophysics Probes - (i) HQ cancels the program/CSR request, (ii) HQ explicitly affirms the existence of a funded Probe program, or (iii) we remain in a state of uncertainty/ambiguity (with HQ still requesting the CSR but there being no clearly identified funding line). **I request that, ideally within the next week, GSFC Leadership describe and document their plans and commitments to AXIS within each of these scenarios, including the following three key areas:**

- a. The availability and level of GSFC support for our core project/proposal staff after 1-October,
- b. The availability and level of GSFC support for system engineers after 1-October
- c. The level of any GSFC support for the AXIS mirror technology development in FY26.

If the GSFC Leadership is truly unable to describe any plans for the early FY26 period, we must conclude that the agency has put the Center in a position where they are currently unable to effectively serve as the AXIS Managing Center. In that case, and in the spirit of delivering the CSR that the astrophysics community and American taxpayer deserves, I believe that we should submit a request to HQ for a delay of the whole CSR process by at least six months. HQ would need to understand that any such extension would have to come with additional Phase A funds and an extension of the launch readiness date. This would let the budget/appropriations process play out and, if the Probe program survives, allow GSFC to subsequently re-establish a viable process for a high-quality AXIS CSR submission.

Email from AXIS PI to Goddard Senior Leadership, September 8th, 2025

The posture at Goddard to implement the FY26 PBR did not change, despite the easing of the agency's broader posture by a September 2025 directive from leadership to begin planning to higher budget levels for the start of the next fiscal year.⁶¹ Even senior division and directorate staff at NASA HQ who sought to intervene and mitigate the damage being done at Goddard were prevented from doing so.

⁶¹ Eric Berger, "In a win for science, NASA told to use House budget as shutdown looms," *Ars Technica*, September 19th, 2025, accessed here: <https://arstechnica.com/space/2025/09/amid-budget-uncertainty-nasa-gets-some-good-news-use-house-funding-levels/>.

Committee Staff have learned that in September 2025, while Goddard was refusing to let AXIS plan beyond October 1st, a staff meeting was held among SMD staff at NASA HQ. In this staff meeting, an employee asked a question: could SMD staffers contact their counterparts at Goddard and inform them that Goddard would also have the authority to spend at the FY25 enacted level under a Continuing Resolution, rather than the level of the FY26 PBR? Amazingly, a senior SMD official at the meeting provided a clear answer: the answer was *no*. SMD staffers were barred from communicating with Goddard about FY26 spending. They would have to remain silent; HQ would not help. Goddard, and the missions like AXIS that depended on it, were on their own.

By the end of September 2025, the cumulative effects of Goddard's hostility towards AXIS - arising directly from its implementation of the PBR - had resulted in a Phase A concept study that was underfunded, under-resourced, and deprived of the institutional expertise and institutional support that is so vital to NASA's flight project development and scientific work. For AXIS, the FY 26 PBR was not a proposal. It was a new reality.

The government shutdown of October and November 2025 further disrupted AXIS's work due to the closure of Goddard and the furlough of its employees during the lapse in appropriated funding.⁶² By the time NASA began to operate again on November 13th, the AXIS team was scrambling to finish the CSR in time to submit it to NASA HQ for review. But despite AXIS's best efforts over the summer and fall, the loss of funding and engineering support had taken their toll, and AXIS entered the final stages of Phase A with a preliminary draft that was over-budget and over-schedule. Committee Staff understand that rather than offering support to AXIS, Goddard management continued to undermine it. Goddard had only assigned a new project manager to AXIS days before the start of the shutdown, despite the previous project manager's decision to accept the DRP months earlier. The diminished engineering support from Goddard endured, even though the mission possessed ongoing technical development needs. At an executive review meeting with Goddard leadership on December 18th, multiple senior Goddard officials criticized the AXIS proposal and compelled the AXIS team to agree to further modifications that left the proposal even *less* compliant with cost and schedule requirements than before. It had become evident that AXIS would not be able to deliver a CSR by the required deadline that met the cost and schedule requirements set forth by the agency. And it had become clear that Goddard senior leadership was more determined to implement the PBR than it was committed to supporting the proposal, even with the prospect of future work for Goddard hanging in the balance.

In the end, AXIS submitted its CSR to NASA HQ by the deadline in January 2026, but with cost and schedule shortcomings that required additional work to comply with

⁶² Brooks Mendenhall, "How the government shutdown affects NASA," *Astronomy*, October 1st, 2025, accessed here: <https://www.astronomy.com/science/how-the-government-shutdown-affects-nasa/>.

the AO's requirements. Even at this late date, it would have been possible for NASA to salvage the mission proposal and evaluate AXIS on its scientific and technical merits. The means to do so were at hand: Committee Staff have learned that in a rare example of positive support from Goddard leadership, the AXIS team had worked with Goddard's Mission Design Lab (MDL) in December 2025 to assess potential options for cost savings and had emerged from that collaboration with a study that provided a pathway to cost compliance if its findings could be incorporated into the proposal. That had not yet occurred in January 2026 due to the extreme time constraints that AXIS was forced to operate under before the CSR deadline, but the opportunity remained. The AXIS team informed NASA HQ, as a part of the CSR, that AXIS would be able to present an amended cost-compliant proposal if the agency were willing to proceed to formal consideration.

Regrettably, NASA HQ refused to give AXIS the chance. Rather than acknowledge the extraordinary circumstances that had plagued AXIS and undermined it - specifically, the lack of institutional funding and support during Phase A due to Goddard's implementation of the FY26 PBR - NASA HQ declined to even consider the CSR and closed the door on the AXIS mission altogether. In February 2026, NASA HQ formally disqualified AXIS from further consideration. In a post-rejection explanatory email to the members of the AXIS team, which was obtained by Committee Staff, the AXIS PI identified the FY26 PBR (along with the DRP and the government shutdown) as a primary cause of the mission's outcome. He wrote: "The FY2026 President's Budget Request (PBR) was released that eliminated the Probe program. As GSFC was required to realign its priorities to the PBR, the majority of AXIS's engineers were quickly reassigned to other projects with no replacements. Due to the PBR, the AXIS team was not directed nor allocated the personnel to work on a 'full CSR' until a few days before the Fall-2025 government shutdown." NASA HQ's rejection of AXIS was not based on any kind of scientific or technical assessment. It was purely a decision to reject the CSR outright due to the proposal's cost and schedule non-compliance. The accumulated effects of OMB's attack and the decision by Goddard leadership to yield to it had cost the agency - and the entire astronomical community - the chance to consider a robust proposal for a groundbreaking telescope, with the potential to revolutionize an entire scientific field for decades to come.⁶³

⁶³ It is worth noting that AXIS was not immune to the disruptive impacts of the building closures and relocations occurring at the Goddard campus in recent months, even though these activities did not directly contribute to the outcome of the CSR. Committee Staff understand that if AXIS had been allowed to proceed in the review process, the mission would have required the extensive use of a particular laboratory in Building 6 on the Goddard campus called the Next Generation X-Ray Optics Lab (NGXO) to conduct technical development. The NGXO Lab, however, was packed up and emptied out during the week of March 6th as a part of the broader "consolidation" taking place at Goddard. The timing of this action was decided in the fall of 2025 and was finalized months before NASA HQ decided not to consider the AXIS proposal. Had AXIS remained under active consideration, this laboratory closure would have been highly disruptive to the AXIS team's work and could have undermined a prominent science proposal right before the agency needed to make its down-selection. Committee Staff view this as a clear and specific example of the careless and irresponsible nature of the consolidation activities occurring at Goddard. Committee Staff also do not believe that Goddard management has satisfactorily addressed the concerns articulated by the Democratic Members of the Committee in their November 2025 oversight letters. Additional

AXIS was a Phase A concept study, not a mission that was guaranteed to move forward. There is no way to know whether AXIS would have been selected in the end. The answer to that question is certainly not for Committee Staff to say; indeed, the other finalist in the Probe Explorer mission class, PRIMA, represents a thrilling concept in its own right that deserves full consideration and agency review. But what Committee Staff can say is that the agency process leading to AXIS's rejection was not the kind of dispassionate, good faith process that results in the elevation of the best scientific ideas and approaches. Goddard undermined AXIS because it was proposed for elimination in the FY26 PBR. Meanwhile, China partnered with the European Space Agency to launch its own state-of-the-art X-ray satellite in 2024 called the Einstein Probe, and both China and Europe have separate plans to launch future flagship X-ray observatories as soon as the next decade.⁶⁴ As global leadership in X-ray astronomy risks shifting to China and beyond, the hazards of allowing politics to influence scientific decision making at NASA are all too clear.

The American people expect NASA to use a robust, intellectually rigorous process, scrupulously free of political interference, to select and fund science missions based on the ideas that possess the greatest scientific merit. It did not happen with AXIS. For the field of X-ray Astronomy, it is a tragic loss of scientific potential; for NASA, it is another self-inflicted wound. The agency, and American science, is worse off because of it.

staff-level oversight is likely warranted to assess the full impact of recent events on Goddard's capabilities and personnel.

⁶⁴ Andrew Jones, "China launches 'lobster eye' Einstein Probe to unveil mysteries of X-ray universe," *Space News*, January 9th, 2024, accessed here: <https://spacenews.com/china-launches-lobster-eye-einstein-probe-to-unveil-mysteries-of-x-ray-universe/>.

Case Study #3: JASD Eliminated

In 1960, NASA developed and launched the world's first experimental weather satellite, the Television Infrared Observation Satellite (TIROS-1).⁶⁵ Since then, the agency has built more than 50 weather satellites, most of which have been operated by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). Today, NASA serves as the formal acquisition agent for NOAA. In this role, NASA is responsible for the acquisition and development of the space system components of NOAA's weather satellite programs, including the spacecraft, instruments, and launch services, all on a reimbursable basis. The NASA-NOAA acquisition relationship for weather satellite programs is detailed in a Management Control Plan (MCP) and a series of Inter-Agency Agreements (IAAs), which establish the roles and responsibilities of each agency.⁶⁶ The Goddard Space Flight Center oversees the day-to-day execution of NASA's programmatic responsibilities for the NASA-NOAA acquisition relationship through integrated joint agency program offices, based at Goddard, which solicit, award, and manage contracts that support NOAA's operational and research satellite requirements.⁶⁷

In 1994, the Clinton Administration directed the merger of the country's civil and military weather satellite programs into a single satellite program. This initiative, called the National Polar-orbiting Operational Environmental Satellite System (NPOESS), would have been managed by a tri-agency program office consisting of NASA, NOAA, and the Department of Defense.⁶⁸ But the effort floundered. The NPOESS program "suffered significant cost overruns and schedule delays,"⁶⁹ and ultimately, the Obama Administration cancelled the program in February 2010 before a single NPOESS satellite was launched.⁷⁰ In the aftermath of this high profile acquisition failure, NOAA transferred some of the NPOESS program to NASA, and the two agencies created a new organizational and management structure to govern the next generation of civil weather satellites, both polar and geostationary.

As a part of the post-NPOESS reorganization, NASA created the Joint Agency Satellite Division (JASD).⁷¹ JASD was established in 2010 as a division of SMD within NASA Headquarters (NASA HQ). According to a November 2016 report by the NASA Office of Inspector General (OIG), "NASA established JASD in April 2010 in an effort to ease

⁶⁵ NASA, Science Mission Directorate, "Television Infrared Observation Satellite Program," accessed here: <https://science.nasa.gov/mission/tiros/>.

⁶⁶ Management Control Plan, "NOAA-NASA Satellite Programs and Projects," Version 2.0, September 2025, accessed here: <https://www.nesdis.noaa.gov/s3/2025-12/NESDIS-PLN-1130-2-september-2025.pdf>.

⁶⁷ *Id.*

⁶⁸ Eli Kintisch, "Stormy Skies for Polar Satellite Program," *Science*, June 2nd, 2006, accessed here: <https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.312.5778.1296>.

⁶⁹ NASA Office of Inspector General, "NASA's Earth Science Mission Portfolio," Report No. IG-17-003, November 2nd, 2016, accessed here: <https://oig.nasa.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/IG-17-003.pdf>.

⁷⁰ *Id.*

⁷¹ *Id.*

strained relationships between the Agency, NOAA, and the U.S. Air Force... JASD is charged with assisting other Federal agencies with their Earth observation systems by coordinating NASA expertise provided on a reimbursable basis."⁷² JASD supplemented Goddard's day-to-day administration of NOAA acquisition programs by offering independent, HQ-level oversight of the acquisition, development, and launch of reimbursable satellite programs, including NOAA's Joint Polar Satellite Systems (JPSS), Geostationary Operational Environmental Satellites R (GOES-R), and Geostationary Extended Operations (GeoXO) programs. JASD could also represent NASA during the agency's interactions with institutions such as Congress regarding its role as the acquisition agent for NOAA. For example, the then-Director of JASD testified on behalf of NASA before a Science Committee joint subcommittee hearing in September 2022, alongside senior NOAA and OIG officials, related to NOAA's weather satellite programs.⁷³

JASD served as an additional level of supervision to ensure that NASA acted responsibly and effectively in its unique role administering significant NOAA funding to execute major acquisition and development efforts. The office provided independent oversight and programmatic expertise to the NASA-NOAA acquisition relationship, and boosted accountability for program execution at the level of NASA HQ. These functions were articulated in the formal Management Control Plans that established the framework of the NASA-NOAA partnership. For instance, the MCP for JPSS from October 2016 described JASD as being "responsible for ensuring the NASA program is being executed consistent with NASA's policies and practices and consistent with direction and guidance" from NOAA.⁷⁴ The MCP elaborated further that JASD would "provide programmatic direction" to Goddard, "conduct strategic planning, formulate and execute budget, assess constellation architecture, establish launch dates... provide Agency-level coordination for launch services; support to JPSS NASA institutions and Centers; technical authority appeals; procurement strategy; and oversight to NASA's budget formulation and execution processes."⁷⁵ The MCP finally detailed that JASD would provide "leadership and oversight to NASA centers" and "ensure NASA budgetary and accounting practices for the reimbursable program under its direction are conducted in accordance with generally accepted accounting principles and facilitate delivery of business data required by its NOAA customers."⁷⁶ JASD's capabilities were put in place to benefit the performance of the entire program.

⁷² NASA Office of Inspector General, "NASA's Earth Science Mission Portfolio," Report No. IG-17-003, November 2nd, 2016, accessed here: <https://oig.nasa.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/IG-17-003.pdf>.

⁷³ Committee on Science, Space, and Technology, Subcommittee on Space and Aeronautics and Subcommittee on Environment, "Looking Back to Predict the Future: The Next Generation of Weather Satellites," September 21st, 2022, accessed here: <https://democrats-science.house.gov/hearings/looking-back-to-predict-the-future-the-next-generation-of-weather-satellites>.

⁷⁴ Management Control Plan, "NOAA/NASA Joint Polar Satellite System," Version 3.0, October 2016, accessed here: https://www.nesdis.noaa.gov/s3/2022-03/JPSS-PLN-3107_v3.01610-Signed.pdf.

⁷⁵ *Id.*

⁷⁶ *Id.*

Committee Staff acknowledge that JASD's role within joint weather satellite programs was a legitimate topic for consideration. Questions existed in terms of defining the most productive way to structure independent oversight within the joint agency partnership. JASD was a small office, employing only nine agency full-time staff in January 2025 along with an additional group of support staff and contractors. It introduced additional bureaucratic scrutiny into a decision-making process that was already complex due to the interaction of two large agencies in a single acquisition program. And agencies should always be open to structural changes if improvements can be made. Committee Staff understand that Goddard had begun to assess its approach to the NASA-NOAA acquisition relationship as early as 2024 in an attempt to improve its efficiency, and that JASD's role was one of many topics being evaluated in that deliberation.

While any good-faith proposal to streamline bureaucracy is worth considering, however, what must not be forgotten is that the *purpose* for which JASD was established remained as vital as ever. JASD may have been small, but the need for robust programmatic oversight of multiple major programs, including the massive \$12 billion-plus GeoXO program⁷⁷ – which will be a key piece of the backbone of NOAA's public safety mission – is as important today as it was when JASD was created.⁷⁸ Consequently, any major changes to that programmatic oversight should have been approached carefully, judiciously, and through a well-conceived process. And Congress, which oversees NASA and its programmatic execution, needed to be involved in that debate. Within the Trump Administration, however, a different authority settled the debate: OMB and the FY26 PBR. Yet again, NASA responded to the PBR with unilateral action. And yet again, a major policy change was irrevocably put into effect before Congress even knew what was happening.

OMB's attack on JASD began even before the official FY26 PBR was released in May 2025. In an earlier document related to the FY26 PBR for NOAA, which leaked to the media in April 2025, OMB harshly criticized NASA's performance as the acquisition agent for NOAA and demanded the termination of the partnership.⁷⁹ This FY26 "passback" memorandum castigated NASA's alleged shortcomings in no uncertain terms, declaring: "OMB recommends an immediate termination of using NASA as the

⁷⁷ Andrew Freedman, "Trump admin strips ocean and air pollution monitoring from next-gen weather satellites," CNN, August 20th, 2025, accessed here: <https://www.cnn.com/2025/08/20/weather/noaa-satellites-climate-trump>.

⁷⁸ The GeoXO program was initially estimated to be a \$19.6 billion program after a period of comprehensive study, review, and public comment, with multi-agency participation. NOAA published the *NOAA Satellite Observing System Architecture Study* in 2018 describing potential options for GeoXO's future architecture, and then notified Congress in 2022, with the *Determination of Readiness* report, that the agency was ready to begin development activities. NOAA explained the implementation plan in detail in a 2023 *Report on Requirements of NOAA's Next Generation Satellites*. NOAA and NASA followed these plans until 2025, when OMB directed NOAA to cut the program to \$12 billion without any assessment of requirements, capabilities, or cost-benefit analysis. Committee Staff continue to question the origins of this cost ceiling and the feasibility of meeting GeoXO mission requirements within it.

⁷⁹ Daniel Cusick, Chelsea Harvey, and Scott Waldman, "White House outlines plan to gut NOAA, smother climate research," *Politico*, April 11th, 2025, accessed here: <https://www.politico.com/news/2025/04/11/white-house-plan-guts-noaa-climate-research-00286408>.

acquisition agent for NOAA's weather satellites. While the expertise and knowledge of the NASA staff have offered significant benefits to the geostationary programs over their history, NASA's reluctance to accept risk, to utilize fixed price contracts, and NASA's high levels of overhead charges has made the continuation of the arrangement untenable."⁸⁰

Such severe language did not appear in the final FY26 PBR, but the proposal remained the same. In the "skinny budget" that was released on May 2nd, OMB asserted that the budget "empowers NOAA to directly negotiate contracts for satellites, eliminating unnecessary layers of bureaucracy and promoting innovation..."⁸¹ The reasoning behind OMB's proposal was elaborated in the full FY26 budget justification for NOAA, released the following month, which argued that NASA's role as the acquisition agent represented an "unnecessary layer of bureaucratic oversight" and stated that NOAA's displacement of NASA as its own acquisition agent would lead to a "more agile and cost-effective program."⁸² The full budget justification avowed repeatedly that NOAA "will also assume the role of acquisition agent," that NOAA's goal was to "become the acquisition agent for these programs instead of NASA," and that NOAA would "assume the primary responsibility for the acquisition agent" of its satellite operations.⁸³ There was no ambiguity. OMB was proposing a sudden end to NASA's role as the acquisition agent for NOAA. As the programmatic oversight office for that interagency partnership, OMB's zeal instantly put a target on JASD.

In the end, nothing so radical as the formal termination of NASA's role as the acquisition agent for NOAA actually took place. At the present time, NASA continues to serve in that role. But OMB had sent a message to NASA and NOAA through the FY26 PBR, and the agencies reacted. Within months, JASD was gone. The elimination of JASD was, in some ways, a complicated story due to the complex bureaucratic dynamics between NASA and NOAA. But in other ways, the story was very simple. JASD was abolished due to pressure from OMB. Rather than resist that pressure - and rather than inform Congress about the major changes under consideration - NASA and NOAA yielded to it. NASA used the circumstances of 2025 to carry it out.

Events moved quickly in the spring of 2025. Committee Staff understand that between April and June, as the FY26 PBR went from rumor to official publication, the drumbeat around the elimination of JASD steadily increased. Sources disclosed that

⁸⁰ Daniel Cusick, Chelsea Harvey, and Scott Waldman, "White House outlines plan to gut NOAA, smother climate research," *Politico*, April 11th, 2025, accessed here: <https://www.politico.com/news/2025/04/11/white-house-plan-guts-noaa-climate-research-00286408>.

⁸¹ White House Office of Management and Budget, "Fiscal Year 2026 Discretionary Budget Request," May 2nd, 2025, accessed here: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Fiscal-Year-2026-Discretionary-Budget-Request.pdf>.

⁸² NOAA, Budget Estimates Fiscal Year 2026, June 2025, accessed here: <https://www.noaa.gov/sites/default/files/2025-06/NOAA%20FY26%20Congressional%20Justification.pdf>.

⁸³ *Id.*

the ultimate impetus was to be responsive to a directive from OMB that, if NASA were to remain as the acquisition agent for NOAA, the two agencies would be required to alter the bureaucracy of their acquisition relationship to align more closely with OMB's vision. Committee Staff have learned that within NASA and NOAA, a belief quickly formed that the best path forward was to end any formal role for NASA HQ in the acquisition relationship and dissolve JASD, the office performing that role. One senior official described it as a way to "satisfy OMB." Notably, even while OMB was exerting pressure on NASA and NOAA to eliminate JASD in the spring of 2025, the agencies themselves suggested that they understood the value of the office and sought to maintain it, or at least its function of independent oversight, in some form. Committee Staff have learned that alternative proposals were floated to preserve JASD's capabilities through modifications in programmatic structure, staffing, and funding. But none of these proposals would be realized because the instruction from OMB was firm. Eventually, NASA and NOAA simply gave in and pursued the most expedient way to comply with it. JASD was the victim of that political calculation.

Once the decision had been made to eliminate JASD, NASA carried out that decision in a way that would only have been recognizable in 2025. The decision was made at very senior levels, behind closed doors, with no broader discussion externally or within the agency. The employees of the JASD office itself heard only increasingly dire rumors and speculation that the office was likely to be dissolved due to the agency's need to adhere to the FY26 PBR. Finally, in June 2025, it was communicated to JASD that the program's elimination was imminent. From that moment on, the fate of JASD neatly illustrates the interrelatedness inside NASA between the PBR and the DRP. According to information obtained by Committee staff, roughly half of the JASD office quickly accepted the DRP within about a month of the decision to eliminate it. The rest of the full-time staff were reassigned elsewhere within the agency, and the larger group of supporting employees was scattered as well, before the end of the fiscal year. The office was rapidly disassembled by simply getting rid of its staff, even before any programmatic changes were formalized.

When NASA did act officially to eliminate JASD, it framed the decision in a manner that revealed exactly where the impetus had come from. In an internal agency "delegation of authority" memorandum to the Director of Goddard, signed on August 12th, 2025, and obtained by Committee Staff, NASA HQ formalized the delegation of NASA-NOAA acquisition authority to Goddard, removed HQ from the flow of programmatic authority, and sanctioned the official "disbanding" of JASD. But NASA's justification for the decision did not argue that JASD was redundant, duplicative, cumbersome, or lacking in expertise or value. Indeed, NASA did not articulate any substantive rationale for JASD's elimination. Instead, the memo's justification for the decision rested entirely with the need to be "responsive to Administration direction." The memo stated that "the proposed delegation addresses an Administration direction to NOAA, to streamline management of NOAA programs." It described the change as being "in response to Administration objectives for achieving greater

efficiency through streamlining of processes.” And it maintained that “NOAA and NASA are proposing an option that is responsive to Administration direction to streamline management.” The motivation for the action was hardly subtle: JASD was being eliminated, and its function was being abolished, to *address an Administration direction to NOAA* and comply with orders from the White House. Nowhere does the memo make an argument on the merits of how the elimination of JASD would actually improve NASA’s performance as the acquisition agent for NOAA. The first page of the memo captures the agency’s position:

National Aeronautics and Space Administration

Mary W. Jackson NASA Headquarters
Washington, DC 20546-0001



August 12, 2025

Reply to Attn of: NASA Science Mission Directorate

TO: Director, Goddard Space Flight Center

FROM: Associate Administrator

SUBJECT: Delegation of Authority for Joint NOAA and NASA Programs

BLUF: SMD recommends the Acting Administrator delegate Joint NOAA-NASA Program authority from NASA Headquarters to the Goddard Space Flight Center. The proposed delegation addresses an Administration direction to NOAA, to streamline management of NOAA programs. NASA decisional authority for acquisition strategy would remain at NASA HQ. This action would be effective as soon as NOAA approves the proposed change in Governance.

Background

This memo proposes an option for the NASA Acting Administrator to consider in response to Administration objectives for achieving greater efficiency through streamlining of processes. As codified in the NOAA-NASA Satellite Programs and Projects Management Control Plan (MCP, Version 1.0, approved September 28, 2023), National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) missions fall under the governance structure, appropriation authority, and programmatic decision authority of NOAA, while NASA provides reimbursable support to the NOAA programs. The Joint Agency Satellite Division (JASD) is an organization within NASA's Science Mission Directorate that was established in April 2010 to support NASA's collaborative partnership with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) to develop, launch and manage these reimbursable satellite programs, projects, and instruments.

NOAA has received Administration direction to terminate and/or restructure its reimbursable agreements with NASA in order to streamline its operations. However, NOAA recognizes that this option presents immediate challenges, since NOAA has neither the required procurement authorities to act as acquisition agent, nor the Systems Engineering oversight and capabilities offered by NASA.

NOAA and NASA are proposing an option that is responsive to Administration direction to streamline management. NASA would modify NASA Policy Instruction 7120.96 (October 17, 2023, see enclosure) by delegating programmatic NASA authority from NASA

NASA Delegation of Authority Memorandum, August 12th, 2025

By the end of Fiscal Year 2025 on September 30th, the decision to dissolve JASD had been made, formalized, and implemented. NASA's August 12th "delegation of authority" memo was followed by the signing of a revised Management Control Plan between NASA and NOAA on September 17th, which reflected that "responsibility for NASA's oversight and management of program/project elements assigned to NASA will be exercised by Goddard Space Flight Center (GSFC) rather than NASA's Science Mission Directorate (SMD) and Joint Agency Satellite Division (JASD)."⁸⁴ JASD's staff was gone, it had been officially eliminated, and its role of independent oversight had been removed from the programmatic structure for the NASA-NOAA acquisition relationship. Neither NASA nor NOAA was led by a Senate-confirmed leader while this occurred. None of it was carried out in a rational, well-reasoned manner with clearly formulated programmatic goals. The process was chaotic, haphazard, and implemented in an environment of fear and rumor, with seemingly little concern for the loss of valuable programmatic expertise. Congress was never consulted and was not even informed that "a significant change to NOAA and NASA governance" - as characterized by the agencies themselves in the revised MCP - had occurred in a critical, multi-billion-dollar acquisition and development program.⁸⁵ The Science Committee was only formally notified about the elimination of JASD in January 2026, when an Acting Assistant Administrator for NOAA acknowledged the act under direct questioning during a subcommittee hearing.⁸⁶

Under the new programmatic structure, far more autonomy is delegated to Goddard and far less independent oversight is conducted by NASA HQ. This new structure will require evaluation. It is possible, as NASA and NOAA assert, that the elimination of JASD has created a framework that more effectively supports the NASA-NOAA acquisition relationship while doing a better job at ensuring NASA fulfills NOAA's acquisition requirements and efficiently manages taxpayer dollars. Time will tell.

Nevertheless, Committee Staff believe certain risks have been introduced into the program by the elimination of JASD that require vigilance on the part of the agencies. JASD's independent oversight capability is gone, and Goddard management must be alert to the risk that the same officials at Goddard could now be charged with both the execution of the acquisition program and the oversight of that execution. The independent, HQ-level accountability that JASD represented for NASA's side of the NASA-NOAA acquisition relationship is gone, and NASA must be prepared to replace it either at HQ or Goddard in a manner that provides adequate accountability and transparency to Congress and other stakeholders. And the level of review that JASD offered to safeguard NASA's legal, contractual, and budgetary compliance is gone, at a moment when that compliance will be tested. According to personnel data

⁸⁴ Management Control Plan, "NOAA-NASA Satellite Programs and Projects," Version 2.0, September 2025, accessed here: <https://www.nesdis.noaa.gov/s3/2025-12/NESDIS-PLN-1130-2-september-2025.pdf>.

⁸⁵ *Id.*

⁸⁶ Committee on Science, Space, and Technology, Subcommittee on Environment, "From Orbit to Operations: How Weather Satellites Support the National Security Mission," January 13th, 2026, accessed here: <https://science.house.gov/2026/1/subcommittee-environment-hearing>.

provided to the Committee in a joint NASA-NOAA staff briefing on March 30th, 2026, the number of Goddard staffers supporting NOAA acquisition programs declined sharply in 2025, with a 19% reduction in career employees and a 36% reduction in contractors between January 2025 and January 2026.⁸⁷ Such a sudden and sharp reduction in the Goddard workforce dedicated to NASA-NOAA partnership programs inevitably increases the risk that mistakes will occur at Goddard due to the loss of experience and the increased workload that must be assumed by the employees who remain. JASD could have provided an additional layer of reassurance regarding the stability of NASA's performance as NOAA's acquisition agent amidst the staffing reductions at Goddard. But JASD was eliminated as a part of that very same turmoil.

NASA performs an important service as the acquisition agent for NOAA's satellite programs due to its deep experience with contract management, satellite acquisition, and launch services for scientific instruments. Both agencies are expected to act as responsible stewards of their acquisition partnership and to make decisions in the best interests of the program and the taxpayer. But NASA and NOAA did not make the decision to eliminate JASD after careful consideration of the potential consequences, whatever arguments might exist on their own merits. The agencies made that unilateral decision, without informing Congress, because they yielded to political pressure imposed by OMB and expressed in the FY26 PBR. JASD could have been preserved in some form, or at least the capabilities it provided. But NASA and NOAA needed to show that they were being responsive to OMB and that they were taking concrete steps to realize OMB's vision. JASD was disbanded because of PBR politics, not good policy. The consequences, whatever they may be, will take years to materialize, but they will be seen in the outcomes of an acquisition program whose success is important for the country.

⁸⁷ NASA-NOAA Joint Agency Briefing for Science Committee Staff, March 30th, 2026.

Conclusion: The FY27 PBR and NASA's Future

This Committee Staff report has looked to the past. It has sought to establish one of the central facts of 2025 at NASA, namely that agency leadership implemented the FY26 PBR - without authority from Congress, hidden from public view, in entirely arbitrary fashion - in concrete and deliberate ways that damaged the agency. NASA's actions in 2025 will shape it for years to come. The case studies featured in this report, as important as they are in their own rights, are just three examples. Similar stories unfolded with similarly adverse consequences throughout the agency. We are only beginning to understand the implications for NASA and American leadership in space. Committee Staff will continue to document these events in the coming months in order to inform the Committee's response to the adversity that can be seen amidst much of NASA's scientific work following the FY26 PBR.

But it is also necessary to look to the future. The fact that Congress decisively rejected the FY26 PBR for NASA does not mean the danger has passed. Every year brings a new Presidential Budget Request. This year is no different, as the FY27 PBR was recently released on April 3rd. Unsurprisingly, given its architects at OMB, the FY27 version of this document would be just as bad for NASA as its predecessor if implemented. In similar fashion to the FY26 PBR, the FY27 PBR calls for a \$5.6 billion decrease to NASA's budget, representing a 23% funding cut from the enacted level of FY26.⁸⁸ The FY27 PBR also proposes a \$3.4 billion cut to NASA Science, noting that such a cut would "terminate over 40 low-priority missions."⁸⁹ Once again, OMB has embraced a defeatist, small-minded vision that forsakes America's legacy of leadership in space and would cede that leadership to our international rivals. There is reason to fear that OMB will try again to compel NASA to unilaterally implement that vision, without any respect for the role of Congress, the rule of law, or the mission of the agency.

Yet there are reasons to hope that NASA will not repeat the failures of 2025. The agency has new, permanent leadership after NASA Administrator Jared Isaacman was confirmed by the Senate in December 2025. Administrator Isaacman has launched an ambitious agenda for crewed spaceflight and science missions alike, and he appears to have a clear idea of the direction in which he intends to lead the agency. That direction is incompatible with the diminished horizons put forth by the FY27 PBR. It is important that Administrator Isaacman defend NASA by protecting its workforce and its mission and shielding it from the political interference and ideological extremism emanating from OMB. Administrator Isaacman must follow the law as enacted by Congress and not adhere to direction from OMB that is contrary to law. If that happens, the agency can start to reverse the damage that was done last year. If not,

⁸⁸ White House Office of Management and Budget, "Budget of the U.S. Government for Fiscal Year 2027," April 3rd, 2026, accessed here: https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/budget_fy2027.pdf.

⁸⁹ *Id.*

NASA's struggles will deepen, with adverse consequences for the agency and the country.

A President's Budget Request is not law. It cannot supersede the laws enacted by Congress. NASA can never allow what happened in 2025 to happen again.

Committee Jurisdiction

Pursuant to Rule X of the House of Representatives, the Committee on Science, Space, and Technology “shall review and study on a continuing basis laws, programs, and Government activities relating to nonmilitary research and development.” The Committee possesses jurisdiction over the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, as well as “astronautical research and development, including resources, personnel, equipment, and facilities” and “outer space, including exploration and control thereof.”

Rule X of the House of Representatives is available at <https://rules.house.gov/sites/evo-subsites/rules.house.gov/files/documents/houserules119thupdated.pdf>.