

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON SCIENCE, SPACE, AND TECHNOLOGY

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July 16th, 2025

The Honorable Sean Duffy
Interim Administrator
National Aeronautics and Space Administration
300 Hidden Figures Way, SW
Washington, D.C., 20546

Dear Interim Administrator Duffy,

Congratulations on your appointment as the new Interim Administrator of NASA. You have your work cut out for you. The situation is not good inside your agency.

We write to you with rising alarm for the future of NASA. As you surely know, Congress possesses the power of the purse in our constitutional system.¹ Congress establishes NASA's annual budget; Congress directs NASA to spend money on certain missions, programs, and priorities; and Congress sets the policies that NASA must implement. These congressional actions are not friendly requests. They are the law. NASA's authority to operate – its authority to do anything at all – does not exist outside of the lawful authority granted to it by Congress. Yet recent statements by top officials at NASA suggest that the agency is attempting to override Congress' rightful authority over NASA's budget, and by extension, over the agency's programs and priorities. NASA appears to be acting in accordance with a fringe, extremist ideology emanating from the White House Office of Management and Budget (OMB) that asserts a right to impound funds appropriated by Congress for the sake of executive branch priorities.² Moreover, it now appears that the agency intends 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, with seemingly no concern for the devastation that will be caused by mass layoffs, widespread program terminations, and the possible closure of critical centers and facilities. These decisions are wrong, and they are not yours to make. If carried out, they will shatter NASA and abdicate America's global leadership in space. The agency must stop immediately.

We are the Ranking Members of the Committee on Science, Space, and Technology ("the Committee") and the Subcommittee on Space and Aeronautics, and we want to be absolutely

¹ <https://constitution.congress.gov/constitution/article-1/>.

² <https://www.axios.com/2025/06/01/vought-impoundment-doge-cuts-rescissions-congress>.

clear. A presidential budget request is just that: a request to Congress. It allows the administration to advocate for its preferred budget during the congressional appropriations process, and no more. The notion that any executive branch agency would unilaterally take steps to implement a budget proposal *before* its budget is enacted by Congress is therefore offensive to our constitutional system. It would be illegal.

We will not dwell on the specifics of the Fiscal Year 2026 (FY 26) Presidential Budget Request (PBR) for NASA because we have nothing but contempt for its goal of dismantling our nation's space agency, with all of the devastating impacts for science and for our economic and national security that would ensue. Nevertheless, it merits a brief discussion solely in light of the agency's decision to use it as the basis for usurping congressional authority. If enacted by Congress, the FY 26 PBR would end America's role as a global leader in space science and exploration.³ The budget request calls for a roughly 25% budget cut to the overall agency budget enacted by Congress in FY 25.⁴ Adjusted for inflation, this funding level would reduce NASA's budget to its lowest level since 1961.⁵ The budget request also calls for a nearly 33% reduction in agency personnel, which would devastate NASA's workforce and cripple the agency's ability to carry out its statutory obligations.⁶ Accordingly, implementing the budget request would be a dereliction of the agency's statutory duties by canceling more than 40 science projects and missions across a broad spectrum of agency programs, alongside broader funding cuts to prominent exploration initiatives.⁷ Unsurprisingly, this bleak, defeatist vision of an America in retreat from space failed to inspire much support after its announcement. Indeed, the FY 26 PBR for NASA was met with a nearly universal assessment that it was dead on arrival, and that Congress would resoundingly reject it during the appropriations process for Fiscal Year 2026.⁸

That should be the end of the story for a presidential budget request. But instead of respecting the rightful role of Congress and the limitations placed upon the executive branch by the Constitution, the Trump Administration has decided to pursue a different – and lawless – course. Across the executive branch, and without any legal authority to do so, the administration is currently moving to implement its budget *proposal* for the *next* fiscal year – 2026 – in the present day. The evidence for this statement has mounted in recent weeks and now appears undeniable. According to multiple media reports, OMB has directed numerous federal agencies to unilaterally freeze funding that has been appropriated by Congress, including \$100 million in funding appropriated for science programs at NASA.⁹ This freeze, or “deferral,” of tens of billions of dollars across the government will later be converted into a rescissions request to Congress that will be submitted towards the end of the fiscal year, close enough to become a so-called “pocket rescission” under the theory that the funding can remain permanently unspent even if Congress fails to approve the request.¹⁰ The funds being frozen at various agencies

³ <https://www.nasa.gov/fy-2026-budget-request/>.

⁴ <https://spacenews.com/nasa-budget-would-cancel-dozens-of-science-missions-lay-off-thousands/>.

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ <https://www.astronomy.com/science/this-graphic-shows-whats-at-stake-in-the-proposed-2026-nasa-budget/>.

⁹ <https://www.politico.com/news/2025/06/12/white-house-agency-funds-executive-power-00395545>;

<https://www.nytimes.com/2025/06/17/us/politics/trump-vought-congress-spending-rescission.html>;

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2025/06/25/trump-budget-law-challenge/>.

¹⁰ <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/06/17/us/politics/trump-vought-congress-spending-rescission.html>.

appear to arise largely from programs targeted for budget cuts in the FY 26 PBR. This is consistent with language contained in a “passback” sent in April by OMB to the Department of Commerce regarding the FY 26 budget request for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), which similarly proposed massive and devastating funding cuts across NOAA’s line offices and research activities.¹¹ In the passback, which was leaked to the public, OMB ordered NOAA and the Department of Commerce to “act now to align existing resources and activities to the direction in Passback.” The passback continued:

OMB expects that the Department will exercise all allowable authorities and flexibilities to align the 2025 operating plans with the 2026 Passback. This includes reducing funding from areas that are not funded in Passback to areas that are protected or increased.

We believe the funding freezes currently being implemented at NASA, and across numerous other federal science agencies within the Committee’s jurisdiction, represent an overt act to carry out the White House’s directive to “align” present-day agency spending with next year’s proposed budget. It should be obvious that such actions lack any authorization from Congress whatsoever and are flatly illegal. In taking these steps, the Trump Administration is violating the law, the Constitution, and the fundamental checks and balances between the branches of government that have governed our nation for more than two centuries.

This is the context in which we observed, with great alarm, comments made by senior agency officials at an agency town hall held on June 25th, 2025.¹² NASA is currently operating under a continuing resolution for Fiscal Year 2025 that maintains largely the same funding levels for the agency as the previous year’s budget for Fiscal Year 2024.¹³ A flat budget is far from ideal, and indeed, we would prefer NASA’s budget to be larger. But it is simply not the case that an extension of the agency’s funding level from one fiscal year to the next somehow creates a crisis of resources or funding that did not exist before and requires drastic intervention to address. Moreover, Congress has now started to signal its intentions for NASA’s next budget in Fiscal Year 2026, and those intentions do not include anything resembling the large funding cuts proposed by the Trump Administration. Members of the Senate Appropriations Committee stated in a recent hearing that their proposed funding level for NASA would stand at \$24.9 billion, a slight increase above FY 2025, and would reject the administration’s proposed cuts to NASA Science.¹⁴ The House Appropriations Committee released its own bill this week that funds NASA at a similar level, with a proposed \$24.8 billion budget that represents an essentially flat budget from FY 2025.¹⁵ And these funding proposals arrive on top of a bill recently enacted by Congress that directed special appropriations worth nearly \$10 billion to NASA, which will remain available to the agency all the way through the end of Fiscal Year 2032.¹⁶ These actions,

¹¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/04/11/climate/noaa-research-budget-cuts.html>.

¹² <https://nasawatch.com/ask-the-administrator/audio-from-todays-nasa-town-hall/>.

¹³ <https://www.congress.gov/bill/119th-congress/house-bill/1968/text>.

¹⁴ <https://www.astronomy.com/science/senate-appropriations-committee-pushes-back-on-2026-nasa-budget-cuts/>.

¹⁵ <https://spacepolicyonline.com/news/house-appropriators-also-reject-trump-proposed-nasa-cuts-fund-national-space-council/>.

¹⁶ <https://spaceflightnow.com/2025/07/05/republican-backed-reconciliation-bill-passes-includes-funding-for-iss-artemis-programs-space-shuttle-relocation/>.

if anything, suggest that NASA's overall budget is likely to be noticeably *larger* in the near term than in recent fiscal years.

In other words, neither the reality that exists today nor the reality unfolding in the congressional appropriations process offers any support to the notion that the presidential budget request will ever come into existence. If Congress had slashed NASA's budget, it would not be a secret. If Congress wanted mass layoffs or widespread program cancellations at NASA, there would be no confusion and no doubt about it. But Congress does not want these things. What Congress has directed for NASA is, among other objectives, "The preservation of the role of the United States as a leader in aeronautical and space science and technology and in the application thereof to the conduct of peaceful activities within and outside the atmosphere."¹⁷ Under our Constitution, decisions on funding federal agencies, including NASA, and on providing the necessary resources to carry out congressional direction are decisions for Congress alone to make.

Yet the agencywide town hall on June 25th made clear that rather than abiding by statute as enacted by Congress – rather than faithfully executing the laws, as the Constitution requires¹⁸ – senior officials at NASA intend to carry out OMB's scheme to unilaterally substitute the administration's proposed budget for the law. We were shocked and disturbed to hear comments such as these uttered by senior agency leaders [*italics added for emphasis below*]:

- **Former NASA Acting Administrator Janet Petro:** "Our country faces significant financial challenges, and every single federal agency has been asked to do its part to help. For NASA, for us, that means working within *a more prioritized budget* for our missions. *We are aligning with the priorities set by the President and OMB* while we await the confirmation of a new administrator."
- **NASA Deputy Associate Administrator Casey Swails:** "We're going to evolve to be a leaner, more agile agency. And, *while the budget's still moving through the legislative process, based on what's proposed, based on the Administration's priorities, we have to take steps now to start realigning our workforce and the resources* to meet the mission needs."
- **NASA Chief of Staff Brian Hughes:** "Where we are in the process is that obviously President Trump has put his budget to Congress, and Congress is in the process. But, this President's budget is similar to the previous few budgets in that it is a downward trend. Given the trajectory of spending and the priorities laid out by the President around the budget, it is prudent—several of us spoke to this, I think Casey said it best. *If we were to wait for all of the Congressional process to unfold and get to final resolution to make any movements or do anything, it would probably be considered irresponsible.*

"Aligning with the priorities set by the President and OMB." "Based on what's proposed, based on the Administration's priorities, we have to take steps now." "If we were to wait for all of the

¹⁷ 51 U.S.C 20102(d)(5), accessed here: <https://uscode.house.gov/view.xhtml?req=granuleid:USC-prelim-title51-section20102&num=0&edition=prelim>.

¹⁸ <https://constitution.congress.gov/constitution/article-2/>.

Congressional process to unfold and get to final resolution to make any movements or do anything, it would probably be considered irresponsible.” These are outrageous statements, and we reject them outright. The idea that NASA would supplant congressional direction in the full-year Continuing Resolution for FY 2025 with the priorities of the executive branch in its spending – the notion that it would be *irresponsible* to wait for Congress to act, as the law and the Constitution require – is wrongheaded and dangerous. But that is what the above statements suggest, and we have additional evidence to support it. We learned recently that NASA has begun defunding and shutting down the project to upgrade the Alpha Magnetic Spectrometer on the International Space Station and is reassigning or laying off staff at NASA Centers that are working on the project.¹⁹ We have also learned that NASA Chief of Staff Brian Hughes appears to have recently ordered scientific missions slated for termination in the FY 26 PBR to stop issuing press releases celebrating new results and scientific achievements, as if to suggest that the mere fact that their funding is proposed to be eliminated in a budget request creates that reality *today*. It most certainly does not. It has even been reported that Mr. Hughes directly told NASA’s field center directors that “the president’s budget request would soon become their operating plans.”²⁰ And all this is taking place while the agency hemorrhages talent, as roughly 2,700 employees and counting have accepted “deferred resignation” offers amidst a campaign of pressure and intimidation overseen by senior agency officials.²¹

This is impoundment in action, and it must stop immediately. Regardless of any improper directives from OMB, NASA must adhere to constitutional principle. The agency must respect the Founders’ vision for the separation of powers between the different branches of government by ceasing all illegal impoundment activities in violation of Congress’ power of the purse. To reassure agency employees and the public that NASA will always follow the law, we call on you to issue a public statement affirming that the agency will spend all congressionally appropriated funds in recent, current, and future fiscal years as directed by Congress, and will not impound any funding. Additionally, to inform our ongoing oversight and to allow us to ensure that NASA is following the law, we request that the agency provide a briefing to the staff of the Committee regarding the agency’s proposed Agency RIF and Reorganization Plan (ARRP) and its current FY 25 spend plan. We previously requested a briefing on NASA’s ARRP in an earlier letter on March 11th, but our request was ignored by the agency.²² We now reiterate that request and expand it in light of recent developments to include the agency’s FY 2025 spend plan, as originally transmitted to OMB and in its current iteration following any changes by OMB. The staff briefing should take place no later than two weeks from today, July 30th, 2025.

We take no pleasure in writing this letter. We are staunch supporters of NASA. We believe in the agency and take pride in its workforce and its mission, as all Americans do. But we are disturbed by the agency’s recent actions, which claim authority that the executive branch does not possess and seek to devastate NASA and transform it into a hollow shell of itself. That would be a tragic future for NASA, for America, and for all of humanity. Yet whether we choose that future or not is a choice that only Congress can make. We expect you to follow the law. In doing so, you will

¹⁹ <https://www.nasa.gov/alpha-magnetic-spectrometer/>.

²⁰ <https://arstechnica.com/space/2025/07/trump-administration-moves-to-tighten-the-noose-around-nasa-science-missions/>.

²¹ <https://www.politico.com/news/2025/07/09/nasa-staff-departures-00444674>.

²² <https://democrats-science.house.gov/letters-to-science-agency-leaders-demanding-doge-rif-plans>.

protect the employees, the mission, and the vision that have made NASA the premier space agency on Earth. We call on NASA to step back from the brink of disaster before it is too late.

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.”²³ 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.”²⁴

To schedule the requested staff briefing, and for any other questions regarding this letter, please contact Pamela Whitney or Josh Schneider with the Committee’s Minority staff at (202) 225-6375. Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,



Zoe Lofgren
Ranking Member
Committee on Science, Space, and Technology



Valerie P. Foushee
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Space and Aeronautics

CC: Chairman Brian Babin
Committee on Science, Space, and Technology

Chairman Mike Haridopolos
Subcommittee on Space and Aeronautics

²³ [119 First Session House Rules](#).

²⁴ *Id.*