

CHAIRMAN SHERWOOD BOEHLERT (R-NY)
OPENING STATEMENT FOR NASA BUDGET HEARING

I'm pleased to welcome everyone here today for our annual review of NASA's budget. As I think everyone knows, this hearing was scheduled before the loss of the Space Shuttle Columbia on February 1st. Still, that tragedy casts a pall over our proceedings today - both emotionally and substantively.

The emotional impact is obvious, and I suppose the substantive ramifications are as well: it's simply impossible to get a clear fix at this point on how much the human space flight program will require in the upcoming fiscal year. And that, of course, raises questions about the NASA budget as a whole. Still, we must begin to plan, and there are numerous relevant questions we need to ask today on topics other than the Shuttle investigation or that program's budget.

I should say, though, that having met with Admiral Gehman at length yesterday, I am more convinced than ever that the Columbia Accident Investigation Board has the independence and resources it needs to conduct a broad, thorough and useful investigation. The Board does still need some additional members, and I expect that more will be appointed within the next few weeks. I look forward to cooperating with Admiral Gehman as the Committee conducts its own bipartisan investigation.

The Gehman investigation could take as long as six months - although portions of it may be completed more quickly.

But we have to assume that the Shuttle may be grounded for an extended period. I understand that this morning Administrator O'Keefe will reveal how NASA intends to operate the International Space Station while the Shuttle is out of commission. I look forward to being able to pursue any questions that plan may raise.

Still, our primary focus this morning is on the FY 04 budget submission, which itself raises a host of issues. I am particularly concerned that spending on aeronautics is slated to decline even as the budget calls for healthy increases for the agency overall. I find this baffling at a time when the need for aeronautics research is so apparent. Unless we're going to rename NASA and call it N-apostrophe-SA, I think the aeronautics budget needs to be rethought.

I should add that we will be holding additional hearings on aeronautics research at both NASA and the Federal Aviation Administration in the coming weeks, including a full Committee hearing on March 12 with the members of the Congressionally-created Aerospace Commission that was chaired by one of my predecessors at the Committee, Bob Walker.

I also want to be sure, among other things, that Earth Science research is getting its due. Earth Science is a critical NASA mission, of enormous scientific utility, and vital to sorting out some key questions of practical as well as intellectual consequence, such as the nature of global climate change.

And I know all of us here are interested in learning more about NASA's still conceptual plans for the Orbital Space Plane. Obviously, research related to replacing the Shuttle seems more pressing with every passing day.

Finally, I know that Administrator O'Keefe today will highlight NASA's personnel needs, which have also been underscored in several General Accounting Office studies. I believe we must act swiftly to give NASA additional flexibility to recruit and retain employees. I have worked with NASA for several months to come up with legislation to do that - legislation that, quite frankly, we had hoped to include in the Omnibus Appropriations bill. For various procedural reasons, that path did not work, but I do intend to introduce a NASA personnel bill within the next week or two.

So we have plenty to discuss this morning and, as always, I look forward to hearing from Administrator O'Keefe.