

BOEHLERT STATEMENT AT HEARING ON NASA'S RESPONSE TO THE CAIB REPORT

WASHINGTON, D.C., September 10, 2003 - House Science Committee Chairman Sherwood Boehlert (R-NY) delivered the following statement today at the Committee's hearing on NASA's Response to the Columbia Report:

"I want to welcome everyone here this morning for the second of our hearings on the report of the Columbia Accident Investigation Board (CAIB) - and the first of our hearings on 'NASA's Implementation Plan on Return to Flight and Beyond.'

"I think Administrator O'Keefe and NASA are to be congratulated for their wholesale embrace of the CAIB report and for moving so swiftly to put together a detailed, specific plan in response. But while the wholesale embrace is comforting, what happens at the 'retail' level is what will matter in the end. We need to ensure that, after this report, reforms are put into effect that will truly change NASA behavior up and down the chain of command.

"The current iteration of the NASA Implementation Plan is a useful start, but - as I'm sure Administrator O'Keefe will be the first to acknowledge - it is only a start. At this point, for example, the report is still pretty much silent on how NASA will implement the CAIB's recommendation to establish an independent technical authority - one of the essential reforms sought by the CAIB.

"And yet, at the same time, the Plan says that NASA will go beyond the CAIB recommendations and review all waivers before return to flight. Such a review is undoubtedly a useful additional step, but it raises questions about who will conduct such a review and whether enough time is being allowed for it to occur thoroughly.

"Indeed, timing remains a critical question for NASA and this Committee. Administrator O'Keefe has made clear in his recent statements, and I'm sure he will again today, that there is no fixed date for return to flight and that the target date of March 11 is a 'no earlier than' date.

"That said, I'm still concerned that the target is exceedingly ambitious and could skew NASA's efforts to return to flight. We also need to hear more about how NASA will schedule launches after return to flight to avoid the excessive schedule pressure related to the construction of the International Space Station - pressure that was discussed in great detail in the CAIB report, and pressure that Admiral Gehman has cited as an area in which NASA leadership created a cultural problem.

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"So we have many questions about the Implementation Plan - but they are just that - questions. This report has been available for less than a week, and it is a work in progress. It is far too early for us to comment definitively on it. All we can really say now is that we will monitor the Implementation Plan and how it is carried out as closely as is humanly possible, even as we deal with larger questions about the future of the human space flight program as a whole.

"I should add that NASA personnel, including the Administrator, have been extremely accessible to both the Members and staff of this Committee in recent weeks, which should enable our oversight

of return to flight to go more smoothly. I'm sure Administrator O'Keefe will continue to be helpful to us this morning.

"Let me also thank Admiral Gehman for appearing before us again today.

"I want to make clear that Admiral Gehman is not here to comment on the Implementation Plan itself - he's only had a day or so to look at it, and he isn't authorized to speak on this subject on behalf of his Board, which has officially dissolved now.

"The reason we've asked Admiral Gehman back is to ensure that no one mischaracterizes the findings or recommendations of the CAIB at today's hearing even inadvertently. The last thing we need is for a misinterpretation to originate here and for it then to be perpetuated as NASA plans for its future. So Admiral Gehman will have a circumscribed, but vital role today, keeping us on the straight and narrow, and I want to thank him for doing that. Mr. Hall?"