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Science & Technology

NASA's programs are intact, for now

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The fiscal year 1983 administration request of $6.613 billion for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration was the only budget victory for pro-growth and pro-science forces in the nation. After a fierce battle with the Office of Management and Budget, which had threatened to cut the budget down to $5 billion, the space agency managed to keep its current science programs intact and even start on advanced program planning in the Space Shuttle effort. However, the very fact that the NASA budget was not cut to the bone this year makes it all the more vulnerable. In the face of economic disaster due to ever-increasing interest rates and a massive budget deficit, NASA is vulnerable because it is what remains to be cut.

In a budget press briefing Feb. 6, NASA Administrator James Beggs revealed that he had to appeal the OMB cuts three times to the White House budget council before he finally agreed to the $6.6 billion budget. The original NASA request was for $7.6 billion.

Congressional concerns

During two days of hearings on the FY83 request Feb. 9 and 10, members of the Space Science and Applications subcommittee of the House Committee on Science and Technology expressed concern about the programs that have been cut by the administration.

The fact that 12 members of the subcommittee, including the Chairman of the full committee, Don Fuqua (D-Fl.), were present for the hearings shows their concern for the nation's space program. Subcommittee Chairman Flippo raised the question of the "militarization" of NASA. His concern was the elimination of civilian technology development programs *in place of* aeronautics and space-related technology used by the military. At issue are the programmatic decisions, including the choice of a Shuttle upper stage needed to launch planetary payloads from space, and the possibility that the NASA Jet Propulsion Laboratory would take on work for the Department of Defense. Defending the civilian technology goals of the space agency, Flippo stated that, "Only through a strong economy and successful competition in the international marketplace can we sustain a strong defense program."

Of the $6.6 billion FY83 budget, $3.467 billion is allocated for Space Shuttle research and development. The main quarrel of the Congressmen and their Senate counterparts is the continued lack of funding for a fifth orbiter for the Shuttle fleet.

Planetary problems

One of the major concerns of the science committee was OMB's stated goal of shutting down NASA's planetary program. Presidential Science Adviser Dr. George Keyworth stated in December hearings that there might not be enough money to do the Galileo mission. The agency's request to begin the Venus Orbiting Imaging Radar (VOIR) mission was denied by the OMB and no other planetary missions are planned for a start in this budget.

Administrator Beggs, and his deputy, physicist Dr. Hans Mark, explained that scientific review committees were studying the possibilities for flying future planetary missions with less expensive, more specific spacecraft.

The proposed modification of NASA's Centaur liquid hydrogen rocket so it would fit in the Shuttle payload bay is not included in the FY83 budget. The Centaur is needed as an upper stage to launch planetary spacecraft, like Galileo, from the Shuttle when in low-Earth orbit. The budget opts for using an upper stage developed by the Air Force which has only one half the capacity of the modified Centaur design. Using this upper stage, it would take thirty extra months for the spacecraft to reach Jupiter, because it would not be boosted from the Shuttle at as high a velocity, at the added mission cost of $170 million.

Looking to the future

The one bright spot in the future programs is a budget increase from $8.8 million to $11.9 million in the advanced programs for the Shuttle. Funding will be used to continue studies at the Marshall Space Flight Center and Johnson Center in manned and unmanned space stations and platforms in space for the 1990s.

Administrative assistant Philip Culbertson told the press Feb. 6 that if NASA got the go-ahead from the White House, designs studies could be done next year for a program beginning in 1984. Administrator Beggs has stated repeatedly that the next goal for the manned space program should be projects leading to a permanent U.S. manned presence in space. Once the Space Shuttle completes its next two test flights in the coming five months, NASA must start planning the uses for its transportation system.

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