

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

November 21, 2023

The Honorable Bill Nelson
Administrator
NASA Headquarters
300 E. Street SW
Washington, DC 20546

Dear Administrator Nelson,

We write to express our strongest opposition to NASA's recent unilateral and unprecedented decision to prematurely move forward with funding cuts to the Mars Sample Return (MSR) mission before Congress has finalized its Fiscal Year 2024 appropriations process. This short-sighted and misguided decision by NASA will cost hundreds of jobs and a decade of lost science, and it flies in the face of Congressional authority.

The 2023 Planetary Sciences Decadal Survey identified the completion of MSR as NASA's highest scientific priority. For the first time in human history, we would launch a spacecraft from the surface of another planet and give our scientists the opportunity to directly analyze samples from Mars. The capabilities demonstrated and science returned by MSR would ensure American leadership with regard to Mars and pave the way for eventual human exploration of the planet. Furthermore, space technological innovation is a critical aspect of our ongoing strategic competition with China and Russia.

The recently commissioned Independent Review Board (IRB) assessment of the MSR Program's implementation plan and management approach reiterated that MSR should be a national space exploration priority, given its scientific and strategic importance. Coupled with changes in the NASA program management structure of MSR and the expeditious finalization of modified mission architecture, funding levels consistent with FY 2023 levels are necessary to ensure a launch no later than 2030 to get samples into the orbit of Mars.

China is rapidly expanding its space program with a new space station, a goal of landing taikonauts on the moon by the end of this decade, a stated intention of being the first to return samples from Mars, and an aggressive vision for more ambitious endeavors such as building infrastructure in space, missions to the outer solar system, and creating a space governance system. U.S. Space Force General B. Chance Saltzman, chief of space operations, said in March 2023 that the U.S. must maintain a status of "perpetual competition." The MSR mission is critical to staying well ahead of the competition in strategic space technologies, meeting the national security challenge posed by China, and maintaining our current competitive advantage.

It is important to note that the House appropriations bill that funds NASA recognizes the critical nature of the MSR mission and would fund it at \$949.3 million, equal to the President's Budget request, and includes the following direction:

Mars Sample Return.—The Committee supports consistent funding for the Mars Sample Return mission. The Committee directs NASA to allocate no less than \$949,300,000 for this mission. In accordance with the pending Independent Review Board’s results, and considering the existing architecture committed to successfully returning samples to Earth, the Committee directs NASA to ensure that its fiscal year 2025 budget request includes the funding necessary to complete the mission launch no later than 2030.

Therefore, we are mystified by NASA’s rash decision to suggest at this stage of the appropriations process that any cuts would be necessary. If forced to operate at the unnecessarily low funding level prematurely directed by NASA in its November 8 letter, the Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL) will not be able to meet the 2030 launch window, billions of dollars in contracts supporting American businesses will be subject to cancellation, and hundreds of highly skilled jobs in California will be lost. This talent represents a national asset that we cannot afford to lose, and if this uniquely talented workforce is lost to the private sector, it will be near impossible to reassemble.

NASA’s deeply short-sighted and misguided decision to unilaterally adjust the funding allocation granted to JPL to carry out the MSR mission violates Congress’s appropriations authority. Therefore, we strongly urge you to rescind NASA’s November 8th funding directive to JPL and not take any further steps to adjust funding levels for the mission until Congress enacts final FY24 appropriations for NASA.

We look forward to working with you to complete Fiscal Year 2024 appropriations legislation that fully funds NASA – including the MSR program, promotes our national security priorities in space, and keeps the United States at the forefront of scientific and technical achievement in space.

Sincerely,



Adam B. Schiff
Member of Congress



Alex Padilla
U.S. Senator



Judy Chu
Member of Congress



Laphonza Butler
U.S. Senator



Mike Garcia
Member of Congress



Young Kim
Member of Congress