

CONGRESSMAN SHERWOOD BOEHLERT (R-NY)
OPENING STATEMENT ON NASA EARTH SCIENCES
April 28, 2005

It's a pleasure to welcome everyone here this morning for our hearing on one of NASA's primary mission areas – the Earth sciences. I'm very pleased that NASA's new Administrator, Mike Griffin, has very clearly and unequivocally reinforced NASA's commitment to Earth Science.

For example, he told Senator Allen during the confirmation process, “[T]here are activities, including Earth Sciences...research, which have little in common with needs of Exploration, and with which NASA had had a long-term involvement. Thus, NASA has certain responsibilities in these areas which cannot and should not be set aside.” And Dr. Griffin told Senator Dorgan, “Earth science continues to be vitally important and I am committed to continuing exploration of the Earth's environment at NASA.”

Unfortunately, NASA's prepared testimony for today's hearing is more problematic. The testimony describes Earth science research as being significant to the extent that it informs our knowledge of, and our capability to explore other planets. This is precisely backwards. The planet that has to matter most to us is the one we live on. You'd think that would go without saying. And we are woefully ignorant of the way this planet works – of the functioning of the land, oceans and atmosphere and how they interact.

It's great if Earth science can contribute to exploration, and greater still if exploration of other planets could teach us more about the Earth.

But the Earth science program doesn't exist as some secondary adjunct of the exploration program. It exists to help us understand the planet we depend on. And there's no reason that NASA can't robustly carry out the President's Vision for Space Exploration while conducting vital Earth science research. In fact, that's what NASA has to do.

That's why the National Academy of Sciences report that was released yesterday is so alarming. The report indicates that NASA may be allowing its Earth science program to erode, perhaps irretrievably, just as we are beginning to understand more about the Earth's processes, just as our technology offers unprecedented opportunities, just as the Administration has announced new international commitments to Earth observation.

This report has to be a red flag for all of us. We need to stop, examine what's happening, and make sure that the fiscal 2006 budget for NASA – whatever its top-level number – include adequate funding to keep Earth science moving forward for the foreseeable future. We need a vision for Earth science, and priorities for Earth science, just as much as we do for exploration and aeronautics.

Yesterday, I heard for the first time a rationale from Dr. Diaz for the proposed cuts in Earth science. And I have to say I found it more troubling than convincing. He argued that some NASA projects could be launched on NOAA satellites and that some other aspects of Earth science could migrate to NOAA.

Now we all want NASA and NOAA to work together even better. In fact, we plan to hold a hearing in the next couple of months bringing the two agencies together to look in more detail at their relationship. But having NASA claim that NOAA will take over activities when there is no indication of that in NOAA's plans or budget strains credulity. It's the sound of one hand clapping, and it won't get any applause from us.

NASA has long been the lead agency for space-based Earth science research. NOAA has operational responsibilities. The two agencies have complementary missions, and the more they can cooperate the better. But one agency cannot substitute for the other, and no agency can build, launch or use data from satellites without money.

Mr. Diaz told us yesterday he had "no visibility" into NOAA's budget. You'd think a window into a partner agency's budget would be a prerequisite for transferring responsibilities. If NASA has plans to rely more on NOAA, those plans ought to be shared and reviewed with us and with the scientific community.

Just citing the notion of relying on NOAA has an after-the-fact budget rationalization is playing with fire.

We have before us today the experts with whom we can begin a thoughtful, detailed and realistic discussion about what NASA needs to do to ensure that we have a healthy, national Earth science program. I can't think of anything more vital to our survival.

Mr. Gordon.