29 March 2006

The Honorable Richard C. Shelby, Chair
The Honorable Barbara A. Mikulski, Ranking Member
Commerce, Justice, Science and Relates Agencies Subcommittee
Senate Committee on Appropriations
S-146A Capitol Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Shelby and Ranking Member Mikulski:

On behalf of the members of the University Corporation for Atmospheric Research (UCAR) and the atmospheric sciences community, we write to urge you to reverse funding cuts to NASA that have the potential to impede this nation’s scientific progress and threaten our international leadership position in science and technology.

As constituents and as scientists, we urge you to restore funding to NASA’s Research and Analysis grants, restore funding to Earth science programs which support the cadre of missions focused on answering some of Earth’s most pressing environmental challenges, and restore funding to the small and medium sized competitive missions that train the next generation of scientists and have produced some of the greatest scientific discoveries in the last twenty years.

NASA’s Earth science program leads directly to major societal benefits to the country, including: improved weather forecasts and warnings; climate outlooks; management of natural resources; and mitigation of natural disasters such as drought, floods, landslides, and volcanoes. In addition, NASA’s unmanned space science programs have provided a wealth of information about space weather, solar driven storms that affect communications and the lives of astronauts, and the atmosphere of other planets.

Of particular concern in Earth science is the fact, as noted by the National Research Council, that, “the nation’s system of environmental satellites is at risk of collapse.” With budget proposals to cancel Hydros and the Deep Space Climate Observatory, delay the Global Precipitation Mission for two and a half years, delay the NPOESS Preparatory Program mission for a year and a half, and make significant cuts to NASA’s Research and Analysis account, the nation is facing a serious problem. NASA satellite observations are central to an improved understanding of the Earth, and span a number of research areas including the Earth’s ozone, air quality, and climate. NASA is the only agency with the capacity to undertake such an ambitious program the results of which are fundamental to our understanding of the health of our planet, upon which all our lives and our children’s lives depend.
Given budget pressures on the country as well as the funding needed to implement the Administration’s vision for manned missions to the Moon and Mars, the temptation may exist to curtail existing programs and missions and cancel new starts. However, once a mission is selected through competition, years and significant resources are invested to ensure that the mission will be successful and contribute to new frontiers of scientific discovery. By cutting the program or suspending funding on missions that are already years into development, NASA is sending the message that it is an unreliable partner to the research and university communities and does not respect peer-review or other competitive processes. This also undercuts the important investment that has already been made by the taxpayer, industry, international partners, and academia, and it eliminates the programs that serve as a key avenue through which much of the technical workforce serving in industry is trained and receives needed experience.

As the Administration’s new vision for U.S. space exploration unfolds, we urge you to protect the vibrant NASA science accounts and missions, current and planned, that make possible the study of our own planet and the environment that sustains life on Earth.

Thank you very much for your attention to this critical issue. We must not stand by quietly while this country’s unique scientific capabilities are diminished. [Copies of this letter are being sent to all Members of the Subcommittee.]

Sincerely,

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