

Transitioning to a Next Generation Human Space Flight System

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Mr. Johnny Walker

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**Testimony of
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Before the Space, Aeronautics, and Related Sciences Subcommittee
Of the
Senate Commerce, Science, and Transportation Committee**

**“Transitioning to a Next Generation Human Space Flight System”
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Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and members of this Subcommittee for the opportunity to testify before you today. My name is Johnny Walker and I serve as Directing Business Representative for District Lodge 166 of the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers. As the largest union at the Kennedy Space Center, we represent over 2,500 hourly men and women who play a critical role in preparing, launching, and maintaining our nation's only human launch vehicle, the Space Shuttle. I come before you today to give voice to the growing concerns of our members and the communities they live in regarding the extended gap between the end of the Space Shuttle program and the beginning of the new Ares/Orion manned vehicle systems.

Our members have been involved with the space program at Cape Canaveral since 1955 and have participated in every human launch event. While contractors have come and gone, we have stayed, providing a knowledge base and skill continuity critical to the safety and success of our nation's space program.

IAM members function as launch operation technicians, mission schedulers, inspectors, ground support technicians, safety support specialists, test conductor operators, air traffic control specialists, and logistic specialists. Additionally, we are plumbers, pipe fitters, sheet metal workers, welders, industrial electricians, crane operators, as well as heavy equipment, crawler, and support services mechanics and operators. Other support occupations include power generator equipment operators, air conditioning mechanics, linemen, alarm technicians, asbestos abatement/insulators, and excavation permit inspectors. Many of these jobs require a journeyman's license or other certification and are not easily replaceable.

Last March NASA Administrator Michael Griffin, in testimony before the House Appropriations Committee, stated that he recalled "...the damage done to our nation's space program by the loss of critical expertise in human space flight following the cessation of Apollo and then six years later the effort to recreate it during the shuttle era." I too recall that time: the layoffs, the disruption in human lives, and the devastating impact on our communities. For some it meant losing their homes. For others it meant picking up and moving away in search of dependable work. For those of us who remained, moral suffered as our co-workers, friends, and neighbors left.

When the shuttle program finally began to move forward, many of the skilled workers, both hourly and salaried, who possessed intimate knowledge of key operations, were gone. NASA contractors were then forced to recruit nation-wide and bring in new people unfamiliar with NASA systems. This was an expensive and time consuming process.

I fear now that NASA will repeat the mistakes of the past. The cessation of the Titan program in 2005 resulted in the layoff of 250 highly skilled employees familiar with complex missile systems. With little hope of future employment at the Kennedy Space Center most left the Cape in search of new work—a possible harbinger of things to come in 2010 when the Shuttle

program ends. If nothing changes, I believe that the potential impact from a gap in programs will be even worse than it was in the 1970s because today's workers at the Cape have had more training and possess higher skill levels than those from a generation ago.

NASA has indicated that the staffing levels for the Ares/Orion systems will be dramatically lower than are currently needed for the Space Shuttle program. Employment at the Kennedy Space Center for the Ares/Orion launch systems is projected to drop to approximately 9,500 from the present level of 15,000 employees. However, if the funding levels remain as currently projected, employment levels could be significantly lower. Given these dire scenarios, NASA must answer some critical questions:

- **What will NASA do for the displaced workers?** Will they be offered some form of transition assistance? What type of severance package will they be offered? How long will health care benefits be covered?

- **What is the plan for the workforce that remains?** What will be the schedule for the new work that will be needed for the new Ares/Orion manned vehicle systems? What will be the skill mix for that new work? What new training will be required? How will NASA communicate these changes?

- **Perhaps most importantly, what is being done to bring in new work to prevent layoffs and preserve the skill base at the Kennedy Space Center?** For example, why not utilize the existing personnel and facilities for the manufacture and assembly of the Ares/Orion launch vehicles?

The GAO, in a May 2005 report on workforce issues related to the retirement of the Space Shuttle, stated that NASA should follow what it calls a "human capital management approach" in planning the transition to the Ares/Orion systems. While we concur with the report's focus on workforce issues, we must strongly insist that this planning process include not only senior NASA and contractor management, but also the participation of frontline hourly and salaried workers and their union representatives. Working together we have a much greater chance of achieving a beneficial transition for workers, our communities, the contractors, and NASA. Such a successful transition will be key to accomplishing NASA's critical mission.

As China doubles its investment in space exploration, deploys satellite destroying weaponry, and makes plans for a manned lunar expedition, we cannot, as a nation, pretend that we can get by on the cheap with a nickel and dime space effort. It is both a matter of our national defense and global technological leadership that we provide the necessary funds for a vital and productive space program. To that end, we must first begin by fully funding the NASA Authorization Act of 2005 and by making up the funding gap that resulted from the continuing resolution for fiscal year 2007. It is my understanding that this will require approximately \$1.7 billion, slightly less than what we are spending per week in Iraq.

From the end of the Space Shuttle program in 2010 until the launch of the first manned Orion vehicle, currently projected to be in 2015, the United States will be without a human launch vehicle. For the nation that first put a man on the moon to be at the mercy and whims of foreign nations for its human space travel needs is simply unacceptable. We must do better and find the necessary funds to move up the Orion launch date. This will greatly enhance our ability to stabilize the workforce and maintain the critical skill base at the Kennedy Space Center.

Mr. Chairman, I know that I speak for all of the dedicated men and women at the Cape, both hourly and salaried, in thanking you, the Ranking Member, and the members of this Subcommittee from both sides of the aisle for your tireless efforts to preserve the preeminence of our nation's space program.

I thank you for this opportunity to testify today and look forward to your questions.