



Defense Bill Plugs Project:

Private Space Station Proposal Delayed by House Opposition

An administration plan to help a private company put a mini-space station in orbit has been sidelined, at least temporarily, by critics on NASA's key House oversight subcommittee. But the proposal has received a boost from the chamber's Armed Services panel.

After a heated hearing on the plan before the Science Committee's Subcommittee on Space Science and Applications March 30, the NASA official in charge of the plan — the centerpiece of the administration's space-commercialization policy — said he would delay issuing a crucial document needed to move the project forward.

The document, a request for proposal (RFP) that would be sent to companies interested in developing such a facility, had already been delayed more than a week, until March 31, by congressional opposition. (*Weekly Report p. 788*)

"It sounds to me like we're going to have to wait a little bit," NASA Deputy Administrator Dale D. Myers said in an interview. "They're not going to support us, and I'm not going to put the RFP out without their support."

Had the agency's administrators issued the RFP — as they had insisted they were about to do for two weeks — Rep. Buddy MacKay, D-Fla. said, "they'd be asking for trouble, let me put it that way."

Meanwhile, lobbyists for Space Industries Inc., the Houston-based firm pushing the project, were successful in getting support for the idea inserted into the report language of the Armed Services Committee's Department of Defense fiscal 1989 authorization bill.

The report, approved by the committee March 29, recommends that the Air Force use \$20 million to explore options for using a commercially developed space facility (CDSF). (*Re-*

lated story, p. 872)

"This has been a parallel track for a long time," a Space Industries lobbyist said. "We just want to move [the CDSF concept] farther along."

Subcommittee Reservations

For now, however, the company's crucial concern is getting the Space Science Subcommittee to at least give the RFP its blessing. The chairman of the full Science, Space and Technology Committee, Robert A. Roe, D-N.J., demanded in a letter to NASA Administrator James C. Fletcher March 15 that he not issue the RFP unless the plan is authorized by Congress. Subcommittee markup of NASA's fiscal 1989 authorization is scheduled for April 12. (*Weekly Report p. 730*)

NASA has been unable to convince the subcommittee that the idea is a worthwhile, interim research alternative to the \$20 billion-plus manned space station the agency wants to have in orbit by the mid-to-late 1990s.

Most on the subcommittee seem firmly opposed to the idea because it may use up scarce space-budget dollars needed for the manned space station. Only its ranking Republican member, Robert S. Walker, Pa., has voiced strong support for the plan, which calls for government spending of up to \$700 million over five years to lease room on the facility. Questions directed to NASA officials by most other members have been hostile.

"It doesn't look optimistic right now, given the tone of the members," said a subcommittee aide.

A Space Industries lobbyist countered, "I suspect it will be a lot closer vote than what you're seeing at this point."

Subcommittee Chairman Bill Nelson, D-Fla., said in an interview after the hearing, "I'm going to let you infer from my questions my doubts, and I'm not going to give you any conclusions."

Nelson asked Myers March 30, "If it comes to the unpleasant choice that we can have one or the other, but not both — a CDSF or a permanent, manned space station — you're saying to us that NASA would recommend that we have a space station?"

Myers said, "Yes, that is correct."

Doubt on the subcommittee stems from NASA's staunch opposition to the idea prior to Feb. 11, when the administration's space-commercialization policy was released.

The plan was favored by other agencies, including the Department of Commerce, represented on the White House Economic Policy Council, which drafted the space policy.

NASA has since come out strongly in favor of the idea; officials say they are identifying ways to use such a facility that they hadn't thought of before.

Pressures Within Administration

Congressional aides working for members opposed to the idea said they had been told that NASA is under heavy pressure from Commerce and the Office of Management and Budget to release the RFP quickly.

Asked when the RFP was going out, Gregg Fawkes, director of Commerce's Office of Commercial Space Programs, said March 31, "It will probably go out the middle of next week." He backed off, however, when told of Myers' statement.

"It's their decision," he said. "We have a strong preference" that the RFP go out quickly because "you can't be showing [the industry] confusion in the government."

The administrator in charge of drafting the RFP for NASA said it was unlikely the document will be issued the week of April 4 because the House is not in session, and Nelson is expected to be out of town.

"We're on hold," NASA's Lee Tilton said.

He added that neither he nor Myers knew about the language in the Armed Services Committee report.

Apparently, few, if anyone, on the Space Science Subcommittee were aware of the language, either, until after it had been approved. It was unclear what, if any, impact the report language would have on release of the RFP.

—By Phil Kuntz