

RICHARD SHELBY
ALABAMA

RANKING MEMBER—COMMITTEE ON BANKING, HOUSING,
& URBAN AFFAIRS

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& HUMAN SERVICES, EDUCATION & RELATED AGENCIES

COMMITTEE ON RULES & ADMINISTRATION

SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON AGING

304 RUSSELL SENATE OFFICE BUILDING
WASHINGTON, DC 20510-0103
(202) 224-5744

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510-0103

June 10, 2011

The Honorable Charles Bolden
Administrator
National Aeronautics and Space Administration
NASA Headquarters
Washington DC 20546-0001

Dear Administrator Bolden:

I am writing you today regarding the Space Launch System (SLS) architecture, particularly the booster system. As you know, the Congress considers rapid development of a 130-metric ton lift vehicle a top priority, and expects NASA to develop that vehicle in the most efficient possible way. I believe that such an approach will lead NASA towards an SLS that utilizes high commonality between simultaneously-developed first and second stages, takes advantage of Ares investments, and respects the outcomes of recent competitions.

But while Congress' first priority is facilitating development of the SLS described above as quickly as possible, it was never our intent to foreclose the possibility of utilizing competition, where appropriate. The 2010 NASA Authorization Act requires use of existing contracts, workforce and hardware, but it does so only "to the extent practicable." Where competitive concepts can be brought to bear without impacting mission schedules or compromising system performance, it is incumbent upon NASA to explore them.

I am concerned, therefore, that NASA is considering a Space Launch System architecture that relies on a booster system developed for the Space Shuttle. I am particularly concerned that this plan might be implemented without a meaningful competitive process. Designing a Space Launch System for heavy lift that relies on existing Shuttle boosters ties NASA, once again, to the high fixed costs associated with segmented solids. Moreover, I have seen no evidence that foregoing competition for the booster system will speed development of SLS or, conversely, that introducing competition will slow the program down.

I strongly encourage you to initiate a competition for the Space Launch System booster. I believe it will ultimately result in a more efficient SLS development effort at lower cost to the taxpayer.

Thank you for your consideration. I look forward to your reply outlining NASA's plans for the SLS booster, as well as more detail on the overall SLS architecture.

Sincerely,



Richard Shelby
United States Senator

STATE OFFICES:

- 1800 FIFTH AVENUE NORTH
321 FEDERAL BUILDING
BIRMINGHAM, AL 35203
(205) 731-1384
- HUNTSVILLE INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT
1000 GLENN HEARN BOULEVARD
BOX 20127
HUNTSVILLE, AL 35824
(256) 772-0460
- 113 SAINT JOSEPH STREET
445 U.S. COURTHOUSE
MOBILE, AL 36602
(251) 694-4164
- 15 LEE STREET
FMJ FEDERAL BLDG., SUITE 208
MONTGOMERY, AL 36104
(334) 223-7303
- 1118 GREENSBORO AVENUE, #240
TUSCALOOSA, AL 35401
(205) 759-5047