

Obama wants \$2.1 billion for NASA's Florida spaceport

Irene Klotz, Reuters

President Barack Obama's proposed 2013 budget for NASA boosts spending at the Kennedy Space Center, which bore the brunt of job layoffs at the end of the space shuttle program last year, the center director said on Tuesday.

The president's \$17.7 billion budget request for NASA for the year beginning October 1 includes \$2.1 billion for the Florida spaceport, an increase of \$323 million over this year's budget.

"During these austere times when other centers went down, for us to go up I think says a lot about the importance of what we're doing and where we're going," Kennedy Space Center director and former astronaut Bob Cabana told a National Space Club Florida Committee meeting in Cape Canaveral on Tuesday.

The center's proposed budget increase won't mean more NASA jobs, however. Cabana told reporters he expects Kennedy Space Center's workforce to remain at about 7,500 employees through 2013. That number includes about 2,050 civil servants.

More than 8,000 contractors, mostly in Florida, were laid off when the shuttles were retired last year.

In addition to closing out the shuttle program, which will cost NASA about \$71 million in 2013, the Kennedy Space Center is overseeing efforts to seed a new commercial human space transportation industry in the United States.

The shuttle program's end left only Russia with the means to fly astronauts to and from the International Space Station, a \$100 billion research outpost that orbits about 240 miles above the Earth.

Russia charges the United States about \$60 million per person for rides on its Soyuz capsules.

To break the monopoly, NASA has invested \$365.5 million since 2010 in six companies, including Boeing, privately held Sierra Nevada Corp and Space Exploration Technologies, which are all developing passenger spacecraft.

Another round of awards, expected to total more than \$300 million, is due to be announced this summer.

The goal of the program is to have at least one and preferably several commercial space taxis able to fly to the space station before the end of 2017.

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The Kennedy Space Center also oversees the agency's launch services program, which purchases rides for science and communications satellites.

The Florida spaceport is in the early phases of reconfiguring the shuttle launch pads, equipment and processing facilities to accommodate other users, such as Space Florida, a state-backed agency working to boost space-related business.

Last year, Space Florida took over one of the shuttle's processing hangars and leased it to Boeing, which wants it for its space taxi work.

NASA's 2013 spending plan includes \$41 million for the Kennedy Space Center's planned multi-purpose launch facility.

Another \$404 million would go toward upgrading ground support systems in preparation for launches of NASA's new heavy-lift rocket. The so-called Space Launch System, which is based on shuttle fuel tanks and booster rockets, is being designed to carry astronauts and cargo to the moon, Mars, asteroids and other destinations beyond the space station.

The first crew test flight, which would use an early version of the rocket, is targeted for 2021. Obama has called for a mission to an asteroid in 2025 and a human expedition to Mars in the mid-2030s.

(Reporting By Irene Klotz; editing by Todd Eastham)

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