

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

August 1, 2025

The Honorable Sean Duffy
Acting Administrator
National Aeronautics and Space Administration
300 Hidden Figures Way SW
Washington, D.C. 20546

Dear Acting Administrator Duffy,

We write to express our deep concern regarding the Trump Administration's continued attack on Congress's constitutional power of the purse and the implications proposed cuts will have on funding for critical NASA Science programs. As you are aware, the President's Fiscal Year 2026 (FY2026) budget request contains the lowest proposed budget for NASA since 1961, despite the President's stated interest in "launching American astronauts to plant the stars and stripes on the planet Mars."¹ These cuts will have a devastating impact on our country's leadership in space exploration, our understanding of the universe, and the thousands of Americans who have dedicated their lives to the advancement of science.

On May 2, 2025, President Trump released his FY2026 budget request, which proposes cutting NASA's overall budget by 25 percent, including a 47 percent cut to NASA Science funding. Not only is this the largest cut to NASA ever proposed, it would cost thousands of American jobs and completely dismantle NASA Science missions, including the Mars Sample Return (MSR) mission, which has bipartisan support and is the top priority of the Planetary Science and Astrobiology Decadal Survey.² By slashing funding from the arm of NASA that brought us cutting-edge technologies like the world-renowned Hubble Space Telescope and the Mars Perseverance rover, the President's proposal will set American innovation backwards, and the effects will be felt for generations to come.

These reductions to NASA Science funding are a form of national self-destruction. They will seriously weaken the U.S.'s ability to compete with other countries, especially as China is already laying out ambitious plans to become a leader in space science by 2050.³ While China has been investing in missions to explore Neptune and return samples from Mars, the President's FY2026 proposal notably slashes funding for the same goals. As such, the President is poised to needlessly cede power and influence to our competitors abroad.

¹ Jennifer M. Dooren, *NASA Soars to New Heights in First 100 Days of Trump Administration*, (April 29, 2025), <https://www.nasa.gov/news-release/nasa-soars-to-new-heights-in-first-100-days-of-trump-administration/#:~:text=In%20his%20inaugural%20address%2C%20President,first%20100%20days%20in%20relentless>; Casey Dreier, *NASA's disastrous 2026 budget proposal in seven charts*, (June 8, 2025), <https://www.planetary.org/articles/nasa-2026-budget-proposal-in-charts>

² Nadia Lopez & Alex Fitzpatrick, *California could get hit hardest by Trump's NASA budget cuts*, (June 13, 2025), <https://www.axios.com/local/san-francisco/2025/06/13/nasa-spending-california-science-trump-cuts>;

³ Ken Moritsugu, *China unveils its plans to turn its feats in space exploration into scientific advances*, (October 15, 2024), <https://apnews.com/article/china-space-moon-research-plan-5934ecd95ac9675d0ed367615f293b9c>

Although Congress has not completed the appropriations process for FY2026, the White House Office of Management and Budget (OMB) has already disregarded Congress's constitutional authority to direct government spending, unlawfully impounding congressionally appropriated NASA FY2025 funds. Before Congress had approved a single appropriations bill, the Trump Administration and OMB Director Russell Vought directed federal agencies to freeze over \$100 million in appropriated funds for science initiatives at NASA.⁴ Amidst the threat of looming cuts, NASA has already lost over 2,000 senior-level employees at NASA centers in Maryland, Texas, Florida, Virginia, Alabama, and Ohio.⁵ These losses will deprive NASA of key expertise on science, human space flight, and mission support. In blatant violation of law and complete disregard for the authority of Congress, the President's budget request has already done significant damage to American space exploration and innovation.

Article I provides to Congress – not the President – control over government spending. This includes the power to set NASA's budget and determine funding levels for programmatic accounts. The Trump Administration and Mr. Vought are attempting to unlawfully substitute their budget request for law. Bypassing Congressional appropriations authority appears to have been Mr. Vought's intention all along. During his nomination hearing on January 22, 2025, Mr. Vought was asked by Senators on the Committee on Appropriations if he would abide by the Constitution and ensure that Congressionally approved funding makes its way to its intended recipients.⁶ Mr. Vought refused to answer and later remarked, "the appropriations process has to be less bipartisan," a threat the Administration has made good on through their efforts to slash Congressionally approved spending through rescissions and impoundment.⁷

The Trump Administration's senseless agenda to gut NASA Science funding and circumvent Congress's power of the purse is a clear violation of the law. We are deeply concerned with the direction of the Administration and condemn their attempt to use the President's budget proposal as a surrogate for the law. In your new role as Acting NASA Administrator, we implore you and the Administration to respect the ongoing appropriations process and the separation of powers it serves.

⁴ Scott Waldman & Corbin Hiar, *White House looks to freeze more agency funds – and expand executive power*, (June 12, 2025), <https://www.politico.com/news/2025/06/12/white-house-agency-funds-executive-power-00395545>

⁵ Sam Skove, *Over 2,000 senior staff set to leave NASA under agency push*, (July 9, 2025), <https://www.politico.com/news/2025/07/09/nasa-staff-departures-00444674>

⁶ United States Senate Committee on Appropriations, "Senator Murray Grills OMB Nominee Russ Vought – Slamming Trump Executive Orders to Illegally Withhold Funding for Communities Across America," (January 22, 2025), <https://www.appropriations.senate.gov/news/minority/senator-murray-grills-omb-nominee-russ-voughtslamming-trump-executive-orders-to-illegally-withhold-funding-for-communities-across-america>

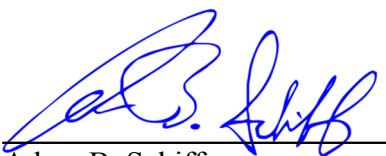
⁷ Kevin Freking, *Schumer calls on Trump to fire key aide*, (July 17, 2025), <https://apnews.com/live/donald-trump-news-updates-7-17-2025#00000198-19d0-d633-afdd-7df8910d0000>

In order to fulfill Congress's constitutional obligation to perform oversight over Executive Branch agencies, we request detailed responses to the following questions by August 8, 2025:

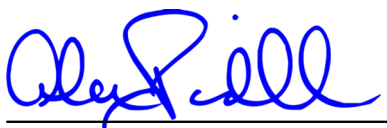
1. At the apparent direction of OMB Director Vought, NASA has already withheld Congressionally approved funds and eliminated thousands of jobs at NASA centers across the country. Under what authority were these decisions made?
2. What steps will you take as Acting Administrator to protect Congressionally approved funding for NASA's flagship missions?
3. What steps are you taking to ensure that NASA's long-term missions and partnerships with international allies are not damaged by the funding uncertainty that has come at the direction of this Administration?
4. How does NASA intend to accomplish its mission of leading in space when the proposed funding cuts will gut world-renowned missions like Mar Sample Return (MSR) and trigger the mass layoff of employees with decades of institutional expertise and knowledge?
5. As NASA's Acting Administrator, what will you do to ensure that further cuts to NASA missions and jobs do not move forward before Congress has enacted the FY2026 budget?
6. Will you commit to providing Congress with monthly updates on any funding restrictions imposed on NASA operations?

We cannot afford to prematurely gut funding for scientific excellence and technological innovation, which NASA has worked for decades to cultivate – especially when doing so would harm American jobs and progress. We look forward to reviewing your responses.

Sincerely,



Adam B. Schiff
United States Senator



Alex Padilla
United States Senator



Angela Alsobrooks
United States Senator



Cory A. Booker
United States Senator



Mazie K. Hirono
United States Senator



Jacky Rosen
United States Senator