United States Senate
COMMITTEE ON THE BUDGET
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July 30, 2019

The Honorable James F. Bridenstine
Administrator
300 E Street S.W., Suite 5R30
Washington, D.C. 20546

Dear Administrator Bridenstine:

I am troubled by continued reports of cost growth and schedule delays involving major projects of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) that could jeopardize future missions.

NASA's acquisition management has been on the Government Accountability Office's (GAO) High Risk List since 1990. In May 2019, GAO released an assessment of NASA's current portfolio of 24 major projects, which are those with life-cycle costs exceeding $250 million. These projects, on which NASA is planning to spend approximately $63 billion over their life-cycles, include human spaceflight programs, telescopes, and the Mars 2020 project. According to GAO, the cost and schedule performance of these programs "continue to deteriorate." GAO found that "cost growth was 27.6 percent over the baselines and the average launch delay was approximately 13 months."

I am concerned that the persistent cost growth and schedule delays identified by GAO put at risk vital NASA missions and taxpayer dollars.

Therefore, I request your responses to the following questions:

1. GAO found that the two primary drivers of the deterioration in NASA's cost and schedule performance are the James Webb Space Telescope (Webb) and the Space Launch System (SLS). The Webb telescope, which is to be the successor to the Hubble Space Telescope, experienced an $814 million cost increase in the past year and is now delayed 81 months. The SLS, a powerful new heavy-lift launch vehicle key to NASA's plans for future human space exploration, had an $881 million cost increase since last year and is delayed by 19 months. Why are these two projects experiencing such significant cost increases and delays? What steps is NASA taking to control further cost increases and schedule delays for these programs? Please provide cost breakdown analyses of the Webb and SLS programs that identify the components contributing to overall costs, such as acquisitions, contractor payments, and administrative costs, among others.

2. Is the James Webb Space Telescope project on track to meet the newly revised launch date of March 2021?

3. GAO found that there are "6 to 12 months of risk" associated with the planned June 2020 Exploration Mission-1 launch date. If those risks are realized and the schedule is extended, to what extent will that affect NASA's ability to execute the second mission, Exploration Mission-2, which will be a crewed flight around the Moon?

4. In May 2018, GAO was not able to identify the extent of cost performance deterioration for the Orion program because NASA did not have an approved, updated cost estimate at the time. In May 2019, GAO reported that the Orion program updated its cost estimate, but this estimate "does not account for all costs that NASA would incur if the program executes to its committed baseline date of April 2023." Why does NASA not have a complete cost estimate for the Orion program, one of the largest programs in its portfolio?

5. GAO reports that the SLS and Exploration Ground Systems (EGS) projects are performing development work for missions beyond Exploration Mission-1 that is not captured in GAO's portfolio analysis because NASA has not established baselines for those efforts. Why has NASA not established baselines for future missions by which cost and schedule performance can be measured? Please provide a cost breakdown analysis of the EGS program that identifies the components contributing to overall costs, such as acquisitions, contractor payments, and administrative costs, among others.

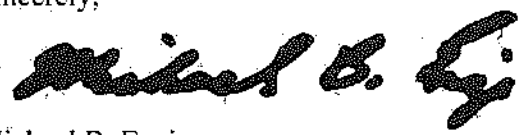
6. GAO observed in its 2019 High-Risk report that, as of December 2018, 15 recommendations regarding NASA's acquisition management remain open. What is the status of each of these open recommendations?

7. In November 2018, NASA's Office of Inspector General (OIG) identified Contracting and Grants as one of NASA's top management and performance challenges. The OIG noted that "[g]iven NASA's continued reliance on contractors to provide essential services, the Agency will remain susceptible to contract fraud schemes..." What controls does NASA employ to oversee its use of contractors, particularly to prevent contract fraud, waste, abuse, and mismanagement, in order to ensure that taxpayer dollars are used efficiently and effectively?

Please provide your response in writing by August 14, 2019. Additionally, I ask that your staff provide my Budget Committee staff with quarterly briefings on the status of GAO's open recommendations.

Thank you in advance for your prompt attention to this matter. If you have any questions about this request, please have your staff contact Doug Sahmel on the Budget Committee staff at 202-224-0642.

Sincerely,



Michael B. Enzi
Chairman
Committee on the Budget