

An Alabama representative just let the cat out of the bag with the SLS rocket

Enlarge / Then-director of the Marshall Space Flight Center Todd May (left) presents Vice President Mike Pence (center) with a Space Launch System model. Congressman Robert Aderholt (R-Ala.) stands at right.

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On Wednesday, NASA Administrator Jim Bridenstine appeared before the United States Congress to talk about the president's budget request for fiscal year 2020. There, Bridenstine faced a slew of questions about the Space Launch System rocket, particularly from representatives whose states have a large number of jobs tied to the program.

The questions came a day after Vice President Mike Pence put the SLS rocket program on notice in regard to his desire to send humans to the lunar surface by 2024. "If our current contractors can't meet this objective, then we'll find ones that will," Pence said. During the House appropriations hearing, legislators from SLS states wanted to make sure NASA still plans to use the rocket for the agency's heavy-lift needs.

For example, Alabama Rep. Martha Roby asked for Bridenstine's assurance that the SLS rocket was truly a great rocket the agency couldn't live without: "Can you highlight for us the

key reasons SLS is the best approach for these missions and what capabilities it provides that other alternatives cannot?" she asked.

A Florida representative wanted to make sure that his state, home of the Kennedy Space Center, continued to receive lucrative contracts to build ground launch systems. A Mississippi representative was concerned that NASA's plan to accelerate development of the SLS rocket would take work away from southern Mississippi's Stennis Space Center, which is slated to perform key test firings. No one, aside from Bridenstine, seemed particularly concerned about the president's goal of a 2024 human landing on the Moon.

A jobs program

But perhaps the most telling comment came from Robert Aderholt, another Alabama representative, whose district lies near the Marshall Space Flight Center. He wanted to know about jobs.

NASA will often highlight the fact that its SLS rocket and Orion spacecraft support aerospace suppliers. For example, this agency website details the number of suppliers in every US state and says, "Men and women in all 50 states are hard at work building NASA's Deep Space Exploration Systems to support missions to the Moon, Mars, and beyond." There are 106 suppliers in Alabama, alone, according to NASA's site.

However, the agency and its representatives in Congress bristle at the suggestion that the SLS and Orion programs are, in reality, jobs programs. This is viewed as an insult. And in some ways, that is understandable—it's not like an army of good people aren't working very hard at the agency to deliver the spaceflight goods.

All the same, there can be little doubt that Congress views these programs through the lens of the jobs they deliver into

their districts.

But what about the suppliers?

Rep. Aderholt made that clear Wednesday in a manner rarely displayed in public. “The SLS and Orion programs are, of course, key to the health of our national aerospace supplier base, and it’s really helped to really put a new boost of energy into the suppliers in all the 50 states following the retirement of the space shuttle,” Aderholt said near the end of the hearing.

When Congress created the SLS rocket in 2010 and 2011, it sought to maximize the use of space shuttle components and to keep key contractors such as Boeing, Aerojet Rocketdyne, and Northrup Grumman involved. Aderholt then noted that the SLS rocket supports NASA jobs at Kennedy Space Center (Florida), Marshall Space Flight Center (Alabama), Stennis Space Center (Mississippi), and Michoud Assembly Facility (Louisiana).

“Can you talk about the importance of our national space programs, such as the capabilities, the supplier base, the innovation of SLS, the Orion benefit on a broad range of aerospace industry users?” Aderholt asked.

Bridenstine—who is himself a former representative who left the House to become administrator—called that a great point. SLS and Orion support an industrial base that keeps America at the forefront of global spaceflight. Then Bridenstine went further: “I can tell you, as a former member of Congress from Oklahoma, we have a lot of suppliers to those programs in Oklahoma that are doing critically important work.”

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