One Mars spacecraft, two senators, and a cloud of questions

“We were a relatively loud voice on MSR, because we just saw a program and a capability that could be solved,” Beck said in his recent interview with Ars. “The cost estimates for MSR, and all the rest of it, was just nuts. I think anybody knows that I have a bit of a soft spot for planetary sciences. So with MSR, I just saw a whole bunch of Nobel Prizes sitting on the surface there, and it was just criminal not to bring them home. As part of that, we studied the whole architecture very, very, very closely, and it was clear to us that a Mars Telecommunication Orbiter would be an important part of that.”

Not dead yet

Ultimately, the Trump White House and the US Congress, as part of the budget process, canceled the Mars Sample Return mission in January.

Only, maybe it’s not dead yet.

In March, the US Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation unanimously passed a new NASA Authorization Act that called for a reinstatement of Mars Sample Return. According to this legislation, NASA shall “establish within the Science Mission Directorate a new Mars Sample Return program for the purpose of returning scientifically curated samples from Mars to Earth.” This mission should cost no more than $8 billion, according to the bill.

Although this legislation has not passed the full US Congress,

we can draw some clues from it. Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas, chairs the committee that authored the bill, and he likely supports a revival of Mars Sample Return because it would bring new facilities and prestige to Johnson Space Center in Texas. Rocket Lab, if it were to obtain the contract to build a Mars orbiter, would have a leg up in the contracting process to develop the rest of the sample return mission. Testing for these vehicles, including a Mars Ascent Vehicle, could happen in Mississippi.

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