

**Congress of the United States**  
Washington, D.C. 20515

February 1, 2024

The Honorable Shalanda Young  
Director for the Office of Management and Budget  
Eisenhower Executive Office Building  
1650 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20504

Dear Director Young:

We write to express our opposition to the Administration's recent unilateral decision to prematurely move forward with budget cuts to the Mars Sample Return (MSR) mission before Congress has finalized Fiscal Year 2024 appropriations. This short-sighted and misguided decision will cost hundreds of jobs and a decade of lost science, and it flies in the face of Congressional authority.

The 2023 Planetary Sciences Decadal Survey identified the completion of MSR as NASA's highest scientific priority over the next decade. MSR was also the highest priority for the previous decade. As we reflect on the amazing images of the James Webb Space Telescope and marvel at the important data garnered about the Earth from missions in the sky, we recognize the payoff when Congress and the Administration partner to support NASA Science missions. Representing years of work and prioritization among the scientific community, the decadal surveys present the Administration and Congress with critical prioritization that ensures we garner the most important discoveries possible.

For the first time in human history, MSR will launch a spacecraft from the surface of another planet and give our scientists the opportunity to directly analyze samples from Mars. The capabilities demonstrated, and science returned, by MSR would ensure American leadership with regard to Mars and pave the way for eventual human exploration of the planet. Moreover, the MSR mission is the completion of a decades-long, four-mission project at NASA to collect and return Mars samples to Earth. Right now, the samples are already being collected on the surface of Mars by the Perseverance Rover, which launched in 2020 and landed on Mars in 2021.

The recently commissioned Independent Review Board assessment of the MSR Program's implementation plan and management approach reiterated that MSR should be a national space exploration priority, given its scientific and strategic importance. Rather than prematurely and drastically descoping the team and personnel at NASA centers, the White House and NASA must expeditiously finalize a new mission architecture. It is our understanding that the modified mission architecture would simplify the program and reduce annual costs, thereby addressing the concerns expressed about MSR in the FY2024 Senate appropriations bill and ensuring that NASA, along with its international and industry partners, can achieve this multi-decade objective previously supported and acknowledged by President Biden.

While we are extremely concerned that the Senate appropriations bill for Commerce, Justice, and Science has proposed just \$300 million for the program in FY2024, House Appropriations Committee leadership continue to work closely with their colleagues in the Senate on a compromise position. It is also important to note that the House appropriations bill recognizes the critical nature of the MSR mission and would fund it at \$949.3 million, equal to the President's FY2024 Budget request.

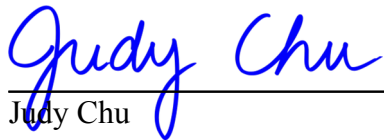
Given the House appropriations bill's strong support for MSR and that full-year FY2024 appropriations are not yet in place, we are gravely concerned that the Administration's decision to reallocate funds away from the Mars program would essentially cancel this high-priority program without Congressional authorization. NASA has already directed the Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL), which leads the MSR mission, to begin operating as though the program budget has already been cut to \$300 million. If not reversed, this decision would ensure that JPL will not be able to meet the next launch window and will force a dramatic reduction of billions of dollars in contracts as well as the termination of hundreds of highly skilled employees. Already, smaller subcontracts on the project have been cancelled, impacting scores of small businesses across the country.

The impacts of these layoffs will be detrimental not just in Southern California, but throughout the U.S. as our nation loses hundreds of extremely talented professionals responsible not only for the Mars Exploration program but also important Earth science and national security missions. If this uniquely talented workforce is lost to the private sector, it will be near impossible to reassemble. All told, these layoffs will result in decades worth of lost science, undermining the years of hard work and investments already put into NASA's Mars Exploration Program and threatening the many years of future scientific discovery and innovation to come.

This deeply misguided decision to unilaterally adjust NASA's funding allocation for MSR violates Congress's appropriations authority and undermines those Members who advocated for the White House's budget request. Already, a bipartisan group of Members of Congress have written to Administrator Nelson urging that he rescind NASA's directive and not take any further steps to lower funding for the mission until Congress enacts final FY2024 appropriations. We likewise urge the Office of Management and Budget to obtain a new mission architecture from NASA that completes the next stage of this mission, maintain the program's budget and refrain from any premature cuts before Congress enacts final FY2024 appropriations, and ensure that sufficient funding is included in the FY2025 budget request to reflect the highest priority ranking provided by the scientific community.

We look forward to working with you as we complete Fiscal Year 2024 appropriations legislation that fully funds NASA and NASA Science – including the MSR program, promotes our national security priorities in space, and keeps the United States at the forefront of scientific and technical achievement in space.

Sincerely,



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Judy Chu  
Member of Congress



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Alex Padilla  
United States Senator



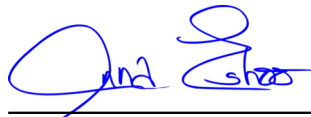
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Adam B. Schiff  
Member of Congress



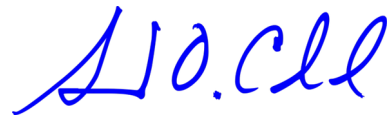
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Eaphonza Butler  
United States Senator



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Anna G. Eshoo  
Member of Congress



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Salud Carbajal  
Member of Congress



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Mike Thompson  
Member of Congress



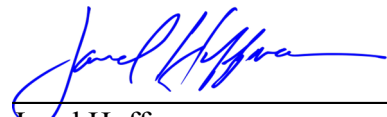
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Katie Porter  
Member of Congress



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Grace F. Napolitano  
Member of Congress




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Jared Huffman  
Member of Congress



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Sydney Kamlager-Dove  
Member of Congress



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Nanette Diaz Barragán  
Member of Congress



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Mike Garcia  
Member of Congress



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Norma J. Torres  
Member of Congress



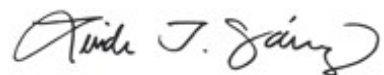
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Ted W. Lieu  
Member of Congress



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Barbara Lee  
Member of Congress



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Linda T. Sánchez  
Member of Congress



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Tony Cárdenas  
Member of Congress



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Ken Calvert  
Member of Congress




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Pete Aguilar  
Member of Congress



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Kevin Mullin  
Member of Congress



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Michelle Steel  
Member of Congress



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Brad Sherman  
Member of Congress



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Young Kim  
Member of Congress



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Zoe Lofgren  
Member of Congress



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Mike Levin  
Member of Congress



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Jim Costa  
Member of Congress



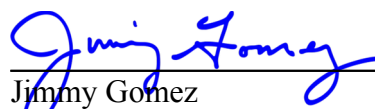
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J. Luis Correa  
Member of Congress



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Mark Takano  
Member of Congress



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Jimmy Gomez  
Member of Congress



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Josh Harder  
Member of Congress



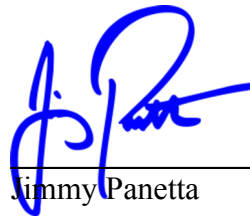
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Ami Bera, M.D.  
Member of Congress



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Raul Ruiz, M.D.  
Member of Congress



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Jimmy Panetta  
Member of Congress



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Eric Swalwell  
Member of Congress



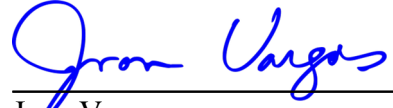
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Robert Garcia  
Member of Congress



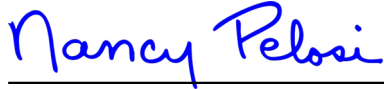
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Scott H. Peters  
Member of Congress



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Juan Vargas  
Member of Congress



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Nancy Pelosi  
Member of Congress



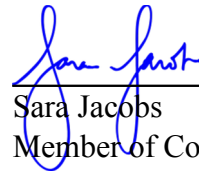
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Mark DeSaulnier  
Member of Congress



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Doris Matsui  
Member of Congress



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Sara Jacobs  
Member of Congress



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Ro Khanna  
Member of Congress



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John Garamendi  
Member of Congress