

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 27, 2024

The Honorable Bill Nelson  
Administrator  
NASA Headquarters  
300 E. Street SW  
Washington, DC 20546

Dear Administrator Nelson,

We write to express our strongest support for the Mars Sample Return (MSR) mission and to highlight the language included in the enacted Fiscal Year 2024 Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Agencies appropriations bill. Given the importance of this mission and clear Congressional direction, we urge you to fund MSR at \$650 million in your forthcoming FY24 spending plan.

For the first time in human history, we will launch a spacecraft from the surface of another planet and give our scientists the opportunity to directly analyze samples from Mars. In the FY24 appropriations bill, Congress was unequivocal in its support for the mission and the Decadal Survey process: the 2023 Planetary Sciences Decadal Survey identified the completion of MSR as NASA's highest scientific priority.

The Independent Review Board (IRB) 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. The IRB very clearly did not recommend that NASA cancel the MSR mission, and it is critical that NASA funds the mission at \$650 million to ensure a timely launch to recover the samples.

We want to reiterate the language in the appropriations bill that there has been a concerning lack of consultation with impacted Members of Congress about NASA's decision to move forward with workforce reductions before a final FY24 appropriations bill was enacted and Congress' concern that NASA's actions have contributed to serious losses in NASA's high-skilled workforce. Congress was clear that NASA should not engage in further workforce reductions. Given the need to prevent any further layoffs, NASA must expeditiously finalize their plans so that the program can be executed and maximally leverage the talented team and assets that are dedicated to MSR.

If forced to operate at the unnecessarily low funding level prematurely directed by NASA in its November 8 letter, billions of dollars in contracts supporting American businesses will be subject to cancellation, we will fail to capitalize on more than a decade of investment in assets already deployed on Mars, and hundreds of highly skilled jobs in California and elsewhere in the country will be lost. This talent represents a national asset that we cannot afford to lose, particularly as we face increased competition from China.

It is of the utmost importance to the success of our space program that NASA upholds its commitment to the Decadal Survey process as a way to independently prioritize missions and that NASA respects Congress' clear intention for MSR to succeed. If NASA continues to defy Congressional intent or continues to propose insufficient funding that necessitates any further reductions in staff downstream, NASA will be demonstrating that it no longer supports the scientific community's prioritization process, does not respect the authority of Congress, and does not recognize the significant role that scientific missions play in maintaining our national competitiveness as key technology demonstrators ahead of any human missions.

Therefore, we strongly urge you to fund the Mars Sample Return mission at \$650 million in your forthcoming FY24 spending plan.

Sincerely,



Alex Padilla  
United States Senator



Raphaela Butler  
United States Senator