

Transcript of remarks by the NASA Administrator, Mike Griffin, at a Q&A session during his visit to Ames Research Center (May 23, 2005). One question reflects his perspective on the lack of consensus within the Earth Science community on overall science priorities. But similar could be said about Planetary Science. (Note: the planetary decadal survey was started around 1999 – not 20 years ago – and came out in 2003).

Steve Hipsian:

Mike, I'm Steve Hipsian and I'm the head of the earth science division here at Ames. And I think I can speak for everybody here, I think the more we hear, the more we like. But I wanted to sort of take a different direction. We in earth science feel like we've kind of got a unique role in the agency in that we respond not simply to the exploration division, but also to several other Presidential initiatives and visions. I was wondering if you could just comment on your thoughts about what NASA's role is -- particularly vis-à-vis the fact that there are many other agencies that are also doing earth sciences.

Mike Griffin:

Well, I -- not everything in NASA is about exploration. We're re-vectoring the manned spaceflight portion of NASA and, to a lesser extent, some of the scientific priorities. I think we went overboard in re-vectoring some of the scientific priorities by taking a ton of money out of earth science and solar physics and, you know, centered connections and other things. And, you know, aiming it all at more Mars missions or whatever. I will note, because I am constantly beaten up by external stakeholders, "Well, you took all this money out of science and you put it into manned spaceflight." No, we really didn't. The science budget is growing and will continue to grow. It certainly was not cut, other than to a mild extent everything in the agency got cut to feed the return-to-flight bill. But it certainly wasn't taken -- I mean exploration got cut in order to feed the return-to-flight bill.

So science as an entity -- as science in the large -- is doing just as

well in the NASA budget as it ever did. The only cuts that have been applied have actually been cuts to the projected rate of growth in consonance with the overall rate of growth at NASA. Only in Washington does a reduction in the rate of growth qualify as a cut. [Laughter] I mean, really.

So all of that said, at the large, science is doing fine. Now if we start to look at the individual portfolio accounts, earth science versus whatever, earth science got whacked. And I've already -- if you saw my testimony -- I've already made moves to put -- to rebalance some of that and we will be trying to fix it even more so. I don't know if we will get it back to exactly the same level that it had before -- and I don't know that it should. Even earth scientists have wandered into my office and said, "You know, there was some fluff there." And I have, also, frankly, challenged the earth science community to cut it out. Now, what's 'it'? 'It' is the practice of having eight different prominent earth scientists wandering up to The Hill with eight different versions of what ought to be done in earth science. You know, circle the wagons and shoot inward kind of approach. [Laughter]

The astronomy community figured out 45 years ago, starting in 1960, that it was a really good idea to get the National Academy on board and do what they called decadal surveys of what is important to be done in astronomy. And then those priorities, which have been studied and blessed by a full suite of prominent scientists in that discipline, can now be handed off to executing agencies. You know, telescopes for NSF, space missions for NASA, and all that. And the priorities pretty much -- I mean, sometimes there's a little disagreement -- pretty much, the priorities get worked off in accordance with what the Academy thinks. So about 20 years ago or whenever it was, the planetary scientists said, "Oh, that's not entirely stupid. Why don't we do the same?" And they started doing it. And now planetary science does very well. Well, earth science hasn't got it. Now there's an upcoming National Research Council report, I'm told, which is, you know, looks a little bit like, smells a little bit like, tastes a little bit like a decadal survey, but isn't quite.

So my challenge to some of the earth scientists -- and it's been very

public -- is get on the ball. You know, there's a model that shows what works. Fighting among each other and trying for primacy among each other doesn't work. Because what happens when Congress sees that is they throw up their hands and they say, "I can't decide." Okay? And so the loudest voice or the most powerful Congressman, or whatever, wins. That's not the way we want to do science. I think earth science -- to do excellent earth science is a priority of NASA, it is an obligation of NASA. But I can't tell -- I'm not an earth scientist -- I can't tell what should be our priorities.

What I want is a coordinated earth science community that does its fighting behind the door and comes out with an established suite of priorities and we will work those off as best we can with, you know, a share of the budget that is determined, frankly, partly by politics and partly by common sense. So that's my promise. But right now, with the state of earth science, I don't know what to do. Literally -- read those words literally -- I don't know what to do. Because I don't know who to listen to and who should be believed and who should be told to sit in the corner and shut up. I'm an engineer, okay? [Laughter] I can't tell what should be done in earth science, but I am willing to take expert guidance if I can get it. Again, a long-winded answer, but I hope it --

Steve Hipsian:

I appreciate it. Being faced with extinction, I think the community is finally beginning to realize that.

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