August 12, 2010

The Honorable Bart Gordon
Chairman
House Committee on Science and Technology
Washington DC 20515

The Honorable Ralph Hall
Ranking Member
House Committee on Science and Technology
Washington DC 20515

Dear Chairman Gordon and Ranking Member Hall:

The Association of American Universities (AAU) – representing 61 U.S. and two Canadian research universities – applauds the efforts of Congress to authorize three years of funding for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). As the world’s premiere space agency, NASA and the research it supports have been essential to the success of the nation’s research and engineering enterprise for the last 50 years.

Since the release of the Administration’s FY 11 budget request for NASA, there has been much debate in Congress and the space community over the future direction of the agency. The NASA authorization bills passed in the House Science and Technology Committee (H.R. 5781) and the Senate (S. 3729) serve as valuable steps toward determining a sustainable path for NASA and the scientific, aeronautical, exploration, and educational missions it supports. We are confident that you will be able to resolve any differences between the two authorization bills during conference negotiations and move quickly to enactment of a final bill before the adjournment of the 111th Congress.

Both bills address several important programs that we strongly believe are worthy of inclusion in a final NASA authorization bill. First, both bills provide continued support for the International Space Station (ISS) until the year 2020. As the nation’s newest national laboratory, ISS will provide America’s research community the opportunity to conduct groundbreaking scientific research in a variety of disciplines.

Second, both bills authorize $5 billion annually for NASA’s Science Mission Directorate (SMD). This sustained level of funding will provide SMD with the resources it needs to perform and support short and long-term Space and Earth Science research. The role of space-based observations in understanding and assessing climate change is absolutely crucial and it is essential that clear provision for Earth Science observations emerge in a final NASA Authorization bill. It is also important that these bills foster competitive principal investigator-led programs such as Explorer, Discovery, and New Frontiers. These programs are highly effective in soliciting the best ideas from the nation’s scientists and in training the next generation of space scientists and engineers. Both bills also provide essential support to NASA’s Suborbital Research Program, which fosters research and training opportunities for graduate students and young investigators. We support the idea of a comprehensive study of the Explorer Program by the National Research Council (NRC) as well as the designation of a lead individual by NASA for the Suborbital Program (as recommended by a recent NRC study).

Third, the bills underscore the value of both aeronautics research and space technology. Sustained support for fundamental aeronautics research, including programs such as Next Generation Air Transportation System is vital, and robust support for the space technology program is essential since it will enable development of cutting-edge technologies that can be used across all of the NASA mission directorates.
Finally, both bills address the valuable role NASA serves in providing STEM education opportunities through programs such as Space Grant for undergraduate and graduate students. We believe that NASA has a key role to play in encouraging young people to study the STEM disciplines and retaining students once they begin their study at the undergraduate level.

In addition to these points, we strongly encourage you to support the restart of production of plutonium-238. As you know, the nation’s supply of Pu-238 is dwindling; there is enough left only for the Mars Science Laboratory mission.

Thank you for your consideration of our comments. We again urge completion of the reauthorization process to provide NASA – and the nation’s space community – with our future direction. Please know that AAU and members of the AAU NASA Presidential Working Group welcome the opportunity to work with you and your staff on the enactment of the NASA Authorization Act of 2010.

Sincerely,

Robert M. Berdahl, President
Association of American Universities

Philip DiStefano, Chancellor
University of Colorado at Boulder

Robert N. Shelton, President
The University of Arizona

AAU NASA Presidential Working Group (Co-Chair)

cc:   The Honorable Nancy Pelosi, Speaker, U.S. House of Representatives
      The Honorable John Boehner, Minority Leader, U.S. House of Representatives
August 12, 2010

The Honorable John D. (Jay) Rockefeller IV
Chairman
U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce,
Science, & Transportation
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Kay Bailey Hutchison
Ranking Member
U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce,
Science, & Transportation
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Rockefeller and Ranking Member Hutchinson:

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Robert M. Berdahl, President  Philip DiStefano, Chancellor  Robert N. Shelton, President
Association of American Universities  University of Colorado at Boulder  The University of Arizona

Philip DiStefano, Chancellor  Robert N. Shelton, President
AAU NASA Presidential Working Group (Co-Chair)  AAU NASA Presidential Working Group (Co-Chair)

cc: The Honorable Harry Reid, Senate Majority Leader
The Honorable Mitchell McConnell, Senate Minority Leader
The Honorable Daniel K. Inouye, Chairman, Senate Committee on Appropriations
The Honorable Thad Cochran, Vice Chairman, Senate Committee on Appropriations
The Honorable Barbara A. Mikulski, Chairman, Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Commerce, Science, and Related Agencies
The Honorable Richard Shelby, Ranking Member, Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Commerce, Science, and Related Agencies