

Our View: Signs of Trouble

Latest Report on NASA's New Ares Moon Rocket Raises Major Technical, Money Concerns

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Don't look now, but there's serious trouble brewing on NASA's new Ares 1 rocket program, which it's banking on to return astronauts to the moon.

And unless the agency gets the situation squared away, the problems will mount and cause major political repercussions in Congress where budget-cutting skeptics about the costly lunar project abound.

The alarms are sounded in the latest report from the Government Accountability Office -- the watchdog arm of Congress -- which said NASA has "not yet developed the knowledge" to successfully press the program forward.

The indictment cited "gaps in knowledge about requirements, costs, schedule, technology, design and production feasibility."

On one front, NASA still doesn't know such fundamentals as how the Ares will link-up with the new manned Orion moonships it will carry into orbit or the size and weight of both vehicles, the GAO says.

On another, NASA is estimating its current budget from Congress won't be enough to pay for the Ares-Orion program during the next several years.

That could delay the Ares' first planned test flight in 2009 from Kennedy Space Center and, in turn, Orion's maiden flight in 2015, casting more clouds over KSC's job picture.

This isn't the first time such warnings have been sounded.

Last year, another GAO report stated NASA's strategy for building the Orion was flawed and "places the project at risk of significant cost overruns, schedule delays and performance shortfalls."

The study estimated \$14 billion in cost overruns on the moonship program by 2011, unless the agency changed the way it does business with contractors.

At this early juncture, the Ares and Orion programs are starting to look like a repeat of NASA's dismal performance on its last two major programs:

The shuttle fleet and International Space Station, both of which came in far behind schedule and far over budget.

Indeed, last year's GAO report based its conclusion on an examination of past NASA projects that showed a whopping 45 percent increase from the original price estimates.

Right now, NASA says it will need about \$230 billion to build the Ares and Orion fleets and return astronauts to the moon around 2020. If past is prologue, expect that figure to rise considerably, delaying or derailing sending crews back to the lunar surface and establishing a base.

The White House and Congress -- saddled with enormous costs for the Iraq war and the flood of baby boomers poised to tap into Medicare and Social Security -- has already put NASA on notice it can't expect more money for its moon goals.

That puts NASA advocates in Congress -- including Florida Sens. Bill Nelson and Mel Martinez, and Space Coast Reps. Dave Weldon and Tom Feeney -- in the impossible position of trying to push the funding boulder up hill.

All this makes it imperative NASA Administrator Michael Griffin and other senior agency officials take the new GAO report as a call to arms and move swiftly to get Ares firmly on track.

If they don't, their troubles are just beginning.