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UNH Scientist Urges Reconsideration Of Earth Observation Plans

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DURHAM, N.H. – From the halls of Congress, to the pages of *Science*, to a personal pitch to U.S. Senator John E. Sununu (R-NH), Berrien Moore III, director of the University of New Hampshire's Institute for the Study of Earth, Oceans, and Space (EOS), is out spreading the news: The White House, Congress, and the National Aeronautic and Space Administration must carefully consider the direction that has been charted for the future of U.S. space-based Earth observation efforts.

In the April 29 issue of *Science*, Moore, a mathematician and biogeochemist who frequently sits on international scientific committees and testifies before Congress, joined other senior U.S. scientists in urging NASA and the Bush Administration to reverse plans to postpone or cancel several satellites designed to gather data on the land, sea, and atmosphere as part of the nation's Earth observation program.

He made the recommendation in his capacity as co-chair, along with Richard Anthes, president of the University Corporation for Atmospheric Research in Boulder, CO, of a National Research Council (NRC) panel that has been studying the issue in order to set the agenda for space-based Earth observations through 2020. The *Science* story followed the April 26 release of that panel's interim report, "Earth Science Applications from Space: Urgent Needs and Applications to Serve the Nation." The report warns that the U.S. Earth observation program is at risk, and comes in part from the recent shift in NASA's focus toward lunar and Mars exploration as called for by President Bush.

The day the NRC report was released, Moore testified before the House Science Committee that the shift in priorities is jeopardizing U.S. leadership in Earth observation. Moore noted that NASA has only one major Earth science mission under development. Moore's testimony and the release of the interim report occurred in conjunction with a meeting of NASA and other scientists who were considering which of half a dozen Earth and space science satellites in operation should be shut down.

"This is the first time I can remember, in the long history I've had with NASA, seeing that there is essentially an end" to space-based Earth observation, Moore told the Congressional committee.

States the NRC report, "At NASA, the vitality of Earth science and application programs has

been placed at substantial risk by a rapidly shrinking budget that no longer supports already-approved missions and programs of high scientific and societal relevance. Opportunities to discover new knowledge about Earth are diminished as mission after mission is canceled, descope, or delayed because of budget cutbacks, which appear to be largely the result of new obligations to support flight programs that are part of the administration's vision for space exploration." The report's authors made specific recommendations on missions that should proceed without delay.

UNH, with a long and rich history working on NASA-funded missions, is very much in the center of the current struggle. UNH consistently ranks high among educational institutions that receive NASA funding year to year, due largely to Earth and space science projects conducted out of EOS. For example, the Space Science Center (SSC) is poised to deliver two flight instruments built over the past three years for NASA's Solar-Terrestrial Relations Observatory (STEREO) mission, and is ramping up for several mid-range to large NASA missions for which the university successfully competed.

"Long-planned space science missions are now at risk with NASA's shift towards manned exploration. Most of these projects rely on much more economical robotic missions to address fundamental science goals, and many have been suspended," said Roy Torbert, director of the SSC.

This was part of the message relayed by Moore, Torbert, and others at UNH when Senator Sununu arrived at EOS recently for a rundown of UNH's NASA work and a tour of mission hardware from past and current projects. As a member of the Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation, Sununu has oversight responsibility for NASA. UNH has both current and upcoming missions that could be jeopardized by the termination of successful spacecraft such as Voyager I and Ulysses. The senator commented that the current NASA exploration initiative should be looked at carefully to avoid leaving many other important projects unfunded.

"New Hampshire is fortunate to have its two senators focused on the important scientific issues facing Earth and space science, and this also means that we at UNH bear a special responsibility to communicate clearly our concerns about these issues," said Moore.