

US sequester cuts force NASA to halt outreach programs

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28 March 2013

The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) has announced an immediate halt and review of all public outreach programs and educational activities and most likely will cancel them altogether. The memo released by NASA states this is the direct result of \$900 million in budget cuts caused by the sequestration—the mechanism put in place by the Obama administration and the Republican-controlled Congress to slash federal spending.

It is unclear at the time of this writing how many jobs will be lost as a result of these cuts.

In terms of scope, the memo goes on to specify that the programs affected include those “intended to communicate, connect with, and engage a wide and diverse set of audiences to raise awareness and involvement in NASA, its goals, missions and programs, and to develop an appreciation for, exposure to, and involvement in STEM [Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics]”.

NASA maintains dozens of such programs, ranging from programs directed at children as young as five years old through college internship programs to promote a study of the sciences.

These cuts come alongside a general slashing of funds to publicly funded basic research. The National Institutes of Health was cut by \$2.52 billion, the National Science Foundation lost \$586 million and Department of Energy research was dropped by \$400 million. All in all, research spending took an 8 percent cut.

NASA was founded under the Eisenhower administration of the late 1950s, a political response to the success of the Soviet Union in its launching of history’s first satellite in 1957. It was also done to coordinate the efforts of disparate organizations that were part of the already existing US space programs.

NASA’s first space mission was Explorer 1, launched on January 31, 1958.

The cutting of NASA’s budget is less than two years after the shuttle program ended in August 2011. It is a continuation of the policy decisions made during the Bush administration and continued under Obama. It also continues the steady decline of NASA’s budget. It is now less than half a percent of the federal budget, half as much as it was 20 years ago and more than eight times less than what it was during the height of the Apollo program.

Significantly, cutting public outreach programs is primarily directed at NASA employees, who run those events. Contractors, on the other hand, will still have NASA money allocated to them. Just last August, NASA awarded contracts totaling more than \$1 billion as part of its Commercial Crew Integrated Capability (CCiCap) initiative to Boeing, SpaceX, and others. SpaceX, owned by billionaire co-founder of PayPal Elon Musk, already received a \$1.6 billion contract from NASA in December 2008 to develop a replacement to NASA’s Space Shuttle.

Contracting out work combined with cutting NASA’s budget goes along with the drive by the Obama administration to privatize public resources. No longer will the public benefit from the advances generated by space flight, of which there are many. In fiscal year 2003, the economies of the 50 states were boosted by more than \$12.5 billion as a result of NASA research. There are tens of thousands of non-space applications of technologies generated by the space program.

The rationale for the necessity of these cuts at NASA, as is the case with cuts to other “unnecessary” federal programs, is that “there is no money.” Left out of this reasoning by agency bureaucrats appointed by the Obama administration as well as the corporate media is

that the banks and major financial institutions are being bailed out to the tune of \$85 billion a month.

These cuts and re-appropriations are part and parcel of those hitting other governmental agencies, which assist the working class in one way or another. Head Start, a program funded by the US Department of Health and Human Services designed to address the educational and nutritional needs of children in poverty under the age of five, will see a loss of 70,000 children from eligibility as a result of the budget sequestration. Cuts to the US Postal Service will stop Saturday mail delivery this August.

Other programs to be cut are the US Department of Education's Title I program, which provides assistance from the federal government to local school districts in areas of rampant poverty. It will lead to the elimination of an estimated 10,000 teachers. Parents of some 1,300 children with severe mental disorders will see their federal support for treatment lost as the Children Mental Health Services program sees its budget slashed.

Ending public outreach programs is a continuation of the ongoing destruction by the ruling elite of the free dissemination of scientific knowledge. It speaks to the decline of American capitalism and the socially regressive character of the profit system on a world scale.



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