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## **U.S. Rep. Dave Weldon: Keep space shuttle alive**

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U.S. Rep. Dave Weldon on Monday unveiled his plans to keep the space shuttles flying beyond their scheduled retirement in 2010, calling it a vital matter of national security that presidential candidates need to address.

The plans, part of a bill he expects to introduce in Congress in coming days, propose giving the agency an additional \$3.7 billion to make up for past funding shortfalls -- enabling NASA to accelerate development of the Constellation rocket system that aims to return Americans to the moon.

It also calls for giving NASA "such sums as may be necessary" to add at least two space-shuttle missions per year until the moon rocket is ready for launch.

The bill also compels NASA to take the necessary steps to ensure the aging shuttle fleet is safe beyond 2010.

NASA Administrator Michael Griffin has opposed extending the shuttle era without more money. Others, including Columbia disaster investigators, have said additional shuttle flights put astronauts at risk.

Weldon, R-Indialantic, said the bill is not very likely to make it into law but he hopes it will force a national debate over the future of America's space program.

His goal is to close the gap between the shuttle and its replacement while at the same time making sure the United States continues to have a way to launch astronauts into space, rather than depending on Russia as is now planned. He also hopes that by extending the shuttle program he will be keeping jobs at Kennedy Space Center, where many of his constituents work.

But he said his main motivation is his concern over American dependency on an increasingly autocratic and potentially hostile Russian government that is aiding U.S. foes such as Iran and Venezuela.

"This is more than about just jobs at KSC and Johnson Space Center [in Houston] and other NASA facilities," he said, speaking at the KSC Visitor Complex where the very same Redstone, Atlas and Titan rockets that first put NASA astronauts in space are on display.

"It is about our leadership in space and a very important policy issue: Are we going to put our space program into the hands of the Russians for such a long period of time?"

Weldon is trying to make the space program a presidential issue, especially before the Florida primaries next month. He said he plans to write all presidential candidates asking them to support at least his bill's objectives.

He then criticized his fellow Republicans running for president for their lack of a NASA policy.

"The best person with a space policy -- actually, the only candidate with any kind of substantial space policy on their Web site -- is Hillary [Clinton]," he said. "The Republican candidates need to wake up and smell the coffee."

Clinton has outlined broad support for human spaceflight, including a pledge to "speed development" of the Constellation program, according to an October policy statement. The Democratic presidential candidate also vowed to complete the international space station and protect NASA workers.

A key rival for the party nomination, Sen. Barack Obama of Illinois, has said he wants to delay Constellation to help pay for an overhaul of U.S. education.

NASA policy has drawn few statements on the Republican side, but Weldon's remarks could change that.

An aide to Mitt Romney said Monday that the former Massachusetts governor "supports President Bush's vision for U.S. space exploration and sees no reason to change course at this point."

A spokesman for former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani said in response to questions about Weldon's initiative that, "Mayor Giuliani feels Americans were born to explore and destined to lead. Rudy feels that as a matter of national security, America must continue to support our national space program."

A national debate over NASA may be the best that Weldon can hope for.

Congress recently killed a measure that would have added \$1 billion to repay NASA for costs it incurred to return the space shuttle to flight after the 2003 Columbia disaster.

In 2007, Congress slashed more than \$500 million from NASA's request of about \$16.8 billion -- pushing back the expected launch of the Constellation program from 2014 to 2015. Next year, NASA is expected to get \$17.3 billion in funding -- less than previous proposals passed by the U.S. House and Senate but in line with President Bush's request for 2008.

Sen. Bill Nelson, D-Fla., said that while he supported Weldon's goals, he did not expect the bill to go far. "I believe we'll have to first see a new president who'll place a higher priority on science and exploration," he said.

Weldon has not spelled out what shuttle missions beyond 2010 would do, but rather that the program continue flying. He said he agrees that the shuttle needs to be retired for safety, financial and other reasons.

But he added: "I want a soft landing. I don't want an abrupt end. . . . I don't want a long period of Russian dependence."

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