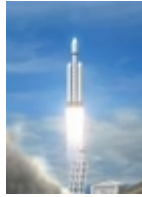




Written by [James Heiser](#) on April 20, 2011

Four Companies Win NASA Funding for Space Program

Private industry is making progress toward lowering the cost of space flight, and NASA would like to come along for the ride. Among the earliest actions of the Obama administration was the appointment of the “Augustine Committee,” which was given the responsibility of carrying out a review of NASA’s manned space program. The result of the committee deliberations was a NASA with its budget intact, but without a mission or mandate to go anywhere. The previous administration’s plans for a return to the Moon and eventual missions to Mars were abandoned — few presidential administrations are interested in implementing the showpiece programs of their predecessors.



One of the implications of the new administration’s policy was to make tentative steps toward privatization. As reported over a year ago for [The New American](#):

The Obama plan would rely on private spacecraft to replace the space shuttle in transporting astronauts to and from the International Space Station. But such reliance on private corporations does not mean that NASA’s spending will be cut; as in all budgetary matters under the current administration, the space agency will receive more funding, and although work on Constellation-related project will be cut back, even cancelled, this does not mean that the space agency will not pursue new technologies.

The implementation of this change in policy continues, as NASA awards a total of \$269.3 million to four companies that are developing new spacecraft, which the space agency may seek to purchase from them in the future. [A story for the Los Angeles Times](#) details the division of NASA’s funds:

On Monday, NASA handed out \$269.3 million to four companies to privately develop rockets and spacecraft for what could be the next step in manned spaceflight.

The winners included Hawthorne-based rocket maker Space Exploration Technologies Corp., or SpaceX, and Boeing Co., which develops spacecraft in Huntington Beach and uses rocket engines made by Pratt & Whitney Rocketdyne in Canoga Park. The other two awards were \$22 million to Blue Origin, a closely held space venture in Kent, Wash., that is owned by Amazon.com founder Jeff Bezos, and \$80 million to Sierra Nevada Corp. of Sparks, Nev.

After the shuttle program is mothballed and before privately built space vehicles are astronaut-ready, the U.S. will have no way to travel to the International Space Station other than shelling out \$63 million for rides on a Russian Soyuz rocket. “We’re committed to safely transporting U.S. astronauts on American-made spacecraft and ending the outsourcing of this work to foreign governments,” NASA Administrator Charles Bolden said in a statement.



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SpaceX has drawn a great deal of attention in recent months with its successful launch of the [Falcon 9 booster](#) and its ambitious plan for the largest rocket since the days of the Apollo program: [the Falcon Heavy](#). For SpaceX, and other rocket manufacturers, a future which is less reliant on NASA funding offers prospects for a greater involvement by private industry in space. In a post-shuttle era, NASA is less a provider of access to low earth orbit, and more a consumer; their role is more analogous to buying tickets on the plane, rather than owning the whole airline. Over the long term, the existence of privately-owned launch vehicles offers far greater prospects for the exploration and development for the commercial use of space than anything dreamed of by NASA or any other governmental space agency.



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