

# AAS Issues Statement on Proposed Cancellation of James Webb Space Telescope

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## AAS Issues Statement on Proposed Cancellation of James Webb Space Telescope <sup>[1]</sup>

[Press](#) <sup>[2]</sup> [Public Policy](#) <sup>[3]</sup>

### AAS Press Release

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The American Astronomical Society (AAS) today issued a strong statement protesting yesterday's proposal <sup>[6]</sup> from the House Appropriations Committee to cancel the James Webb Space Telescope (JWST) <sup>[7]</sup>, Hubble's successor and the centerpiece of U.S. space astronomy for the next two decades. "The proposed cancellation of JWST is a bad idea," says AAS Executive Officer Dr. Kevin B. Marvel. "Several billion dollars have already been spent developing new cutting-edge technology, and the last thing the American people want is for Congress to throw good money away. The U.S. will rightly be proud of the accomplishments of JWST, but first we need to finish it and launch it."

JWST is much larger than the Hubble telescope — 6.5 meters (21.3 feet) in diameter compared with 2.4 meters (7.9 feet) — and is designed to see much farther out in space and much farther back in time, to the era when the first stars and galaxies lit up the infant universe. Conceived in 1996 and under construction since 2004, JWST is passing one technical milestone after another en route to a launch later this decade. Just last month opticians finished polishing <sup>[8]</sup> the last of its 18 primary-mirror segments.

The House move to cancel JWST is part of a larger congressional effort to impose belt-tightening at NASA, the National Science Foundation (NSF), and other federal science agencies. In the Appropriations Committee's draft bill <sup>[9]</sup>, for example, NASA is funded at \$16.8 billion, which is \$1.6 billion below last year's level and \$1.9 billion below President Obama's request, and NSF would receive \$6.9 billion, the same as last year's funding and \$907 million below the president's request. The AAS recognizes that these are difficult and challenging economic times but feels strongly that

any short-term budgetary gains from canceling JWST would be more than offset by the associated loss of high-tech jobs, damage to U.S. preeminence in science and technology, and loss of a mission that, like Hubble, is guaranteed to inspire the public and motivate large numbers of American schoolchildren to pursue careers in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.

“JWST will lay the foundation on which a better understanding of the early universe will be built,” says AAS President Dr. Debra M. Elmegreen. “It has the potential to transform astronomy even more than the Hubble Space Telescope did, and it will serve thousands of astronomers in the decades ahead. We cannot abandon it now.”

The full text of the AAS statement, written by the Society’s Executive Committee and the Committee on Astronomy and Public Policy, follows:

**American Astronomical Society Statement on the James Webb Space Telescope**  
*Adopted 7 July 2011*

The proposal released on July 6 by the House Appropriations Subcommittee for Commerce, Justice, Science and Related Agencies to terminate the James Webb Space Telescope would waste more taxpayer dollars than it saves while simultaneously undercutting the critical effort to utilize American engineering and ingenuity to expand human knowledge. Such a proposal threatens American leadership in the fields of astrophysics and advanced space technology while likely eliminating hundreds, if not thousands, of high-tech jobs. Additionally, this proposal comes before the completion of a revised construction plan and budget for a launch of JWST by 2018. The United States position as the leader in astronomy, space science, and spaceflight is directly threatened by this proposal.

The JWST is the highest-ranked mission in the National Academy of Science’s Astronomy and Astrophysics decadal survey released in 2000 and remains a high priority for the Nation’s astronomers in this decade as well, as the revolutionary successor to the Hubble Space Telescope. This survey, conducted once every 10 years by hundreds of the Nation’s leading scientists, prioritizes -- based on scientific merit and impact -- projects proposed by the scientific community that require significant government support for completion. These reports represent a community consensus on the efforts necessary to advance our knowledge of the universe. The potential of JWST to transform astronomy underlies many of the activities recommended in the 2010 decadal report released last August. JWST is designed to observe well beyond Hubble’s capabilities. It is expected to serve thousands of astronomers in the coming decades to revolutionize our understanding of our place in the Universe, just as Hubble has done since its completion and launch just over two decades ago.

The JWST’s completion, launch, and operation will unveil new knowledge about the earliest formation of stars and planets and on a wide range of additional advanced scientific questions, including many not yet formulated. As was true with the Hubble Space Telescope, recognized as a tremendous success by the public, scientists, and policy-makers, building the most advanced telescopes comes with the risk of unexpected costs and delays. However, the whole Nation can rightly take pride in the engineering and scientific accomplishment that the completion and launch of such instruments represents. With the help of important international partners, we are the only nation that could lead such an effort; we should not shirk from completing the project when the most difficult engineering challenges have already been overcome. As stated in the Casani report, an independent review of project readiness completed late last year, “The JWST Project has made excellent progress in developing the difficult technologies required for its successful operation, and no technical constraints to

successful completion have been identified.” The mirrors stand ready and waiting for integration into the spacecraft. The telescope has passed both preliminary design review and critical design review. It is time to complete construction and look ahead to JWST’s launch and science operations.

The American Astronomical Society calls upon all members of Congress to support JWST to its completion and to provide strong oversight on the path to this goal. Too many taxpayer dollars have already been spent to cancel the mission now; its benefits far outweigh the remaining costs. We must see the mission through. We are a great nation and we do great things. JWST represents our highest aspirations and will be one of our most significant accomplishments.

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The American Astronomical Society (AAS), established in 1899 and based in Washington, DC, is the major organization of professional astronomers in North America. Its membership of about 7,500 individuals also includes physicists, mathematicians, geologists, engineers, and others whose research and educational interests lie within the broad spectrum of subjects now comprising contemporary astronomy. The mission of the AAS is to enhance and share humanity’s scientific understanding of the universe. Among its many activities, the AAS publishes three of the leading peer-reviewed journals in the field: *The Astrophysical Journal* [10], *The Astronomical Journal* [11], and *Astronomy Education Review* [12].

- [Back to AAS Press Releases](#) [13]

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