

Plum Brook 'a national asset'

NASA official says Plum Brook Station should do well under new focus on research

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PERKINS TWP.

NASA Plum Brook Station is an ideal place to test the cutting-edge space exploration technologies the Obama administration wants to develop, a NASA official said Wednesday.



"If we want to be a technology leader in the world, we have to make technology investments."

Richard Braun, NASA's chief technologist

When ongoing modifications of the Space Power Facility and other Plum Brook facilities are carried out, Plum Brook "will be essentially a national asset," said Robert Braun, the space agency's chief technologist.

Braun talked to reporters during a visit to NASA Glenn Research Center in Cleveland and explained that his office, which would receive up to 5 percent of NASA's budget, is supposed to focus on advanced technologies.

NASA has been relying upon 1960s and 1970s technology and needs to refresh its research work to prepare for the "grand missions" of the future, Braun said.

"If we want to be a technology leader in the world, we have to make technology investments," he said.

Braun said he's confident that NASA Glenn will do well when awards are made for carrying out research.

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Braun said he believes some of the entities bidding to do research will need to use Plum Brook, because it is a "unique facility."

The Space Power Facility, a huge vacuum chamber, was used for testing some of the NASA missions to Mars on which Braun worked on.

About 175 people work at Plum Brook, including 25 federal employees and 150 people who work for contractors, said Sally Harrington, a NASA spokeswoman.

NASA's future path is uncertain. The Obama Administration has sought to cancel Project Constellation, the Bush Administration's project for returning astronauts to the moon and sending them on the Mars. Obama has asked Congress to shift instead to developing technologies for unspecified future missions and to relying on private rocket companies to carry out many missions.

Earlier in August, the Senate passed a compromise bill that would cancel Constellation but restore a U.S. government rocket program for a new heavy lift rocket, while also giving private rocket companies some money, the Orlando Sentinel reported. The House also has been working on a bill.

Much will depend on what finally emerges, Braun said.

In all of those budget talks, NASA has been committed to finishing the refurbishing of Plum Brook, Braun said.

"At least when I've been around, there's been no discussion of anything else," he said.