Numerous benefits of space exploration

By Rep. Ralph Hall (R-Texas)

Forty years ago the world watched in wonder as American astronauts blazed through Earth's atmosphere into outer space and landed on the moon. There was no previous first time in history that humans set foot on another celestial body. There was no comparable new opening in the modern world today, with the economy floundering and the national debt soaring into the stratosphere, some may suggest that we simply cannot afford to sustain human space exploration. I would argue just the opposite.

Anyone who follows NASA knows that President Obama recently launched an independent review of planned U.S. human spaceflight activities. The blue-ribbon panel, headed by Norman Augustine, retired chairman and chief executive officer of Lockheed Martin, and my friend, is expected to release its findings in August. I am confident that Norm will not support any launch findings, and I am also optimistic that the panel will promote an ambitious goal for manned space exploration.

The Augustin panel comes to a similar conclusion. NASA has made great progress in developing the Orion vehicle and the Ares launch systems. Constellation is the time to set the bar higher. Now is not the time to reduce the already accepted increases in science and technology breakthroughs. Economic growth is driven by technological innovation, and space exploration fuels this innovation. It takes courage, desire, and vision to explore the unknown. And it takes national leadership at all levels. We must not default on our vision for space or permit other nations to take away our position of leadership at the forefront of exploration and research. That leadership translates into economic opportunities, national security, secure manufacturing jobs, and an increased standard of living for all Americans.

This week we are celebrating the 40th anniversary of the Apollo 11 moon landing. When history is written, America will be recognized for one of the most significant technological achievements of the 20th century and one of the most thought-provoking human triumphs of all time. This audacious feat, witnessed by billions of people around the world, captured the imagination of all Americans and led to unprecedented increases in science and engineering enrollments at our colleges and universities. The example is clear. NASA is one of our best success stories and deserves our enthusiastic support. Now is not the time to reexamine our goals or expectations. Now is the time to set the bar higher.

Hall is ranking member of the House Science and Technology Committee.