

# Orlando Sentinel

## **Space race: Florida vs. Virginia**

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By Barney T. Bishop | Guest columnist

Ever heard of Wallops Island? This small barrier island off Virginia's coast may not be a household name, but it has the potential to threaten Florida's position as a leader in space flight.

The island's primary resident is NASA, and the Wallops Island Flight Facility is prepped to become the 21st century's capital for manned space flight.

On the other hand, most Floridians know of Cape Canaveral and its prominent role in America's space endeavors. Kennedy Space Center has historically been the site from which Americans have departed for the final frontier, but Wallops Island could easily change that.

If Florida does not retain its position as a leader in space innovation, businesses and employers statewide will lose billions of dollars generated by space-related activities.

Thanks to NASA and other space services, Florida saw \$4.1 billion in overall economic benefits during the 2008 fiscal year. That figure includes \$2.1 billion in household income with contracts stretching across 47 of Florida's 67 counties.

The Panhandle region is the second-largest recipient of NASA contracts, followed by Tampa Bay and southeast Florida. If the Kennedy Space Center ultimately fails, the effects will reach beyond the Space Coast.

Like the Mercury, Gemini and Apollo programs before it, the space-shuttle program will ultimately be replaced and is expected to be decommissioned this year. As a result, Florida will lose approximately 7,000 high-paying, shuttle-program-dependent jobs and an additional 13,000 subcontractor and space-affiliated jobs.

These engineers, technicians and managers — who bring home \$77,000 on average — will be forced to go where their skills are needed. At a time when Florida's unemployment rate is the highest it's been in 34 years, we cannot afford to lose more jobs.

Florida's work to keep manned spaceflight based at Cape Canaveral is not going unchallenged. Virginia Gov. Bob McDonnell has pledged to make Wallops Island the best spaceport in America with an aggressive plan that includes an aerospace roundtable and \$1 million in annual state funding for the facility.

Additionally, U.S. Sen. Barbara Mikulski, D-Md., chair of the Subcommittee on Justice &

Science Appropriations, has secured more than \$35million in NASA and other federal dollars for critical infrastructure upgrades. By making Wallops Island the centerpiece of America's space endeavors, Maryland's job creation and economy will grow as NASA employees, contractors and subcontractors will relocate to her adjacent state.

Florida is at a crossroads. Despite strong efforts by the Space Florida and the Economic Development Commission of Florida's Space Coast, Florida continues to neglect needed infrastructure investments to keep Cape Canaveral on the cutting edge.

Associated Industries of Florida has long recognized the importance of the space industry to the entire state and will continue to be a leader in advocating its preservation.

For Florida to once again become competitive and maintain Cape Canaveral as America's primary spaceport, several steps must be immediately taken. First and foremost, Florida's congressional delegation must work together to reinstate federal space dollars to our state. We also need the governor's focus and leadership to make the space program a top budget priority. With thousands of jobs at stake, Space Florida's strategic plan must be fully funded and supported by the state Legislature.

If we are to remain a power player in space exploration, a concerted effort must be undertaken — both in Tallahassee and Washington — to ensure Kennedy Space Center's future role in spaceflight and to keep thousands of jobs in the state. We must act now, or Florida will be destined to play second fiddle to Wallops Island.

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