NASA will delay two ambitious missions to search for extrasolar planets in order to fund a shuttle mission to upgrade the Hubble Space Telescope, agency chief Mike Griffin told a US Senate subcommittee on Thursday.

Griffin, who has held his post for just a month, also announced plans to reorganise the agency's management structure and suggested changes to the construction schedule of the International Space Station.

"NASA cannot afford everything that is on its plate today," Griffin told the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice, and Science. The hearing covered NASA's budget request for 2006 as well as changes to its 2005 budget.

Griffin is proceeding with plans to send a shuttle mission to repair and upgrade Hubble, reversing a controversial decision by his predecessor Sean O'Keefe to simply let the telescope die. Griffin told the Senate committee he would make a final decision on the servicing mission after the first two shuttles return to flight.

But funding the Hubble mission would mean the indefinite postponement of two future missions to search for extrasolar planets - the Space Interferometry Mission, which had been scheduled for 2011, and the Terrestrial Planet Finder, which was set to launch in 2014. And he said the agency was considering delaying the next rover mission to the Red Planet, called the Mars Science Laboratory, from 2009 to 2011.

"We have to have priorities," Griffin said, adding that reducing budgets across all programmes or eliminating funding in the middle of existing projects "is not an effective way to save money. I would look to delaying programmes that have not yet started."

Griffin also reaffirmed plans to retire the three remaining space shuttles in 2010 and accelerate the development of their replacement, called the Crew Exploration Vehicle. He said a single contractor for the vehicle would be chosen in 2006 rather than in 2008, as originally planned - a change that could offset costs due to the programme's acceleration.

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