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Colorado lawmakers react with shock to disaster

Sen. Wayne Allard, R-Colo., said it is too early to tell whether the space shuttle Columbia tragedy will hurt the U.S. space program in a similar way the Challenger crash did in 1986.

"I think we probably will have hearings on it," he said, speaking after a Weld County town meeting Saturday. "Our hope is that we will find the cause of the explosion and take corrective action."

Allard said he was stunned when he heard the news.

"It was a shock when I woke up this morning and turned on

the radio," he said. "My thoughts and prayers immediately were for the families of the astronauts."

The people gathered at the town meeting at Aims Community College Corporate Education Center, 5590 11th St., paused for a moment of silence before beginning the meeting.

Back in Colorado for the weekend, Congresswoman Marilyn Musgrave, R-Colo., heard about Columbia's fate on the radio in her car. As soon as she returned to her Fort Morgan home, she turned on the TV to

see the coverage. "This is so tragic, so sad. So close to landing and then this tragedy," she said, adding that her heart goes out to the families of the astronauts as well.

Like many others who watched the videos of white streaks stretching across the Texas sky, Musgrave said the tragedy reminded her of the 1986 explosion of space shuttle Challenger.

"Once again as a nation, we are seeing something on our TVs that makes us very sad. ... It just seems like yesterday that this



Allard



Musgrave

happened," she said. Today Musgrave flies back to Washington, D.C., where she's sure many people will be seeking answers.

- Staff reports

LAWMAKERS REACT

Commitment to space affirmed

By Bill McAllister and Mike Soraghan
Denver Post Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — Colorado lawmakers joined the nation Saturday in expressing grief over the Columbia tragedy, but most said it will not weaken the nation's commitment to an ambitious space program.

"I know we will come back stronger and safer from this," said Rep. Mark Udall, D-Colo., the only member of the state's delegation to serve on a committee with direct oversight of the space program.

The House Science Committee will probably hold hearings on the accident, Udall said. "There will be a strong commitment to moving forward, but we first need to pause and remember those who died," he said.

The emphasis will be "let's assist NASA in getting to the bottom of this, ... and join hands ... and get the program up and running again," Udall said.

Sen. Wayne Allard, R-Colo., said he found that Colorado residents at three town meetings he held Saturday share his support for the space program. "At each meeting we had a moment of silence for the families of the astronauts and for the NASA family," Allard said.

The accident "concerns me, (but) it doesn't shake my faith in the space program," Allard said after a meeting in Greeley. "My belief is that we will overcome this."

Space exploration has brought a lot of benefits to Colorado and the country, said Allard, who learned of the accident as he was driving to his first town meeting in Longmont. When he heard a radio broadcast saying NASA could not communicate with the shuttle and faced an "emerging problem," Allard said, he feared the worse because that phrase is "NASA-speak for trouble."

"My first thought was that this thing has blown up in the air, and

that's what happened," said Allard, a member of the Armed Services Committee and a champion of space-based missile-defense programs.

For Rep. Tom Tancredo, R-Colo., the accident had personal significance. Within the first few weeks of his arrival in Washington in 1999 he met Israeli astronaut Ilan Ramon, who perished Saturday.

He said Ramon and then-NASA Administrator Daniel Goldin gave him an autographed poster that still hangs in his Capitol Hill office.

"Just another one of those things that happen that illustrate the frailty of life and the bravery of those who risk their lives," Tancredo said, calling the astronauts "proud, incredible folks."

Tancredo said he doubts that the accident will have much effect on the space program. "In an endeavor

of this magnitude and importance, there are certainly dangers, and you always are balancing the risk to the rewards."

Rep. Diana DeGette, D-Colo., said the focus should be on the families of those who died. "Our thoughts and prayers are with the families of the crew," she said. "As the spokesperson for NASA said, we are going to work to make sure we get to the bottom of this catastrophe."

Rep. Bob Beauprez, R-Colo., said he hopes the accident causes "nothing more than a minor delay" to the space program. "We want to press on," he said, adding that "this is the price of freedom."

"It's a tragedy that they are gone," Beauprez said of the astronauts. "It is somewhat of the price we pay to dream bigger dreams."

Rep. Scott McInnis, R-Colo., viewed the tragedy as "a sad day for NASA, for the families of the victims, and for the nation as well," said spokesman Blair Jones.

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