

Mississippi's 'Tower of Pork' costs taxpayers \$352 million

By Steve Wilson
October 28, 2014

One of these things is not like the other.

Tower of Power is a horn-driven funk band from the 1970s. The "Tower of Pork" A-3 rocket engine test tower sits idle at the [John C. Stennis Space Center](#)^[2] on the Mississippi Coast.

One asks, in a song, what's hip? The other begs the question: Why does NASA need a \$352 million rocket engine test tower for a [cancelled program](#)^[3]? The tower was finished in January and designed to test an engine for the [Constellation program](#)^[3], which cancelled in 2010.

U.S. Sen. Tom Coburn, R-Okla., issues an annual [report](#)^[4] on federal government waste, the "Wastebook," and NASA's A-3 rocket test tower made the list of 100 "silly, unnecessary and low-budget" projects, which add up to \$25 billion.

"Neither party is immune for supporting wasteful spending," said [Nicole Kaeding](#)^[5], a budget analyst at the Cato Institute. "Entrenched interests encourage policymakers to allow wasteful spending to continue. These sort of issues illustrate the idea of concentrated benefits and diffused costs; those who benefit directly from a project care more deeply about the outcome. So, these entrenched interests pressure policymakers to support the proposed projects, leading to unnecessary spending."

The tower, which was supported by U.S. Sen. Roger Wicker, R-Miss., with an amendment slipped into NASA's budget in 2010, will cost the agency about [\\$1.5 million to \\$1.75 million](#)^[6] annually to maintain the structure. It was designed to test the [J-2X rocket engine](#)^[7] at altitudes up to 100,000 feet.

But with the cancellation of the Constellation program and the associated Ares series of rockets that use the [J-2X](#)^[7], the tower is unneeded. Now it gathers dust.

"The A-3 Test Stand has been completed and put into a safe and maintainable configuration," said Paul Foerman of the NASA Office of Communications at Stennis.

But the "Tower of Pork" isn't the only wasteful facility in the NASA inventory. According to a [report](#)^[6] by the NASA Inspector General's office, the agency has identified 203 facilities the agency's mission directorates had no use for after 2012. These facilities, located across all

NASA Centers, include wind tunnels, test stands and airfields. They take about 1.9 million-square-feet and cost the agency nearly \$14 million per year to operate and maintain.

The report cited political interference from Congress as a reason duplicate or wasteful infrastructure continues to be supported.

There's nothing funky about waste.

“What I have learned from these experiences is Washington will never change itself,” Coburn said in the [report](#)^[4]. “But even if the politicians won’t stop stupid spending, taxpayers always have the last word.”