

# PROFILE: Stephen C. Nunez

By Joanne Hale

**W**hite Sands Test Facility (WSTF), located in southwestern New Mexico, has been a part of the NASA Johnson Space Center (JSC) since its construction in 1963. Its primary mission is to provide the expertise and infrastructure to test and evaluate spacecraft materials, components and rocket propulsion systems to enable the safe human exploration and utilization of space.

Beginning with Project Apollo in the early 1960s, WSTF has supported every United States human exploration space flight program. It continues to play a key role in the nation's space effort by evaluating materials and components for use in propulsion, power generation, and life-support systems; crew cabin equipment; payloads; and experiments carried aboard the Shuttle Orbiter and the International Space Station.

Stephen C. Nunez, the new Manager of WSTF since July 2003, is a seasoned NASA veteran who brings with him his One NASA background and can-do attitude.

Nunez began his career at NASA in 1989 as a systems engineer after receiving his bachelor of science degree in civil engineering from Mississippi State University in 1984. He has held various positions throughout several NASA centers including Deputy Manager of the International Space Station Management Integration Office at JSC and Detail to Associate Administrator of the Office of Space Flight at NASA Headquarters. He also served as a Congressional Fellow to the United States Senate Majority Leader focusing on aerospace and veterans' issues.

Nunez shared his recent experiences and plans for the future with *Roundup*.

## How does the President's recent announcement affect WSTF?

A large portion of our work is Shuttle and Station related, so from that perspective it will impact us. However, WSTF has a proven track record of supporting the safe exploration and use of space dating back to the Apollo program. We stand ready to do our part to support the President's vision.

## What has been your experience at WSTF so far?

My experience has been very positive here. I have found that the WSTF team has strong passion, commitment and a great sense of pride in supporting our nation's space program. This team exhibits a "can-do" attitude with everything they do, which is a real asset to NASA. It is an honor for me to lead such a talented and dedicated group of people. I am also honored that General Howell, Randy Stone and others have the confidence in me to do the job.

## You have worked at various NASA facilities – Stennis, JSC and NASA HQ. How do you feel that this diversity has helped you in your position as manager of WSTF?

Each assignment that I have had has helped me to grow and gain a better understanding of what the roles are at Stennis, JSC and Headquarters. Even my time on Capitol Hill has added to my experience. I learned something from every one of those assignments. It has given me a good understanding of the big picture. By working at different centers, I have learned to value the importance of One NASA.

As a result of working at different centers I have been able to apply One NASA to what we are doing here at WSTF. For example, shortly after I arrived here we had a couple of large procurements to make by the end of fiscal year 2003. We did not have enough people to complete the procurements at the time, and JSC had a heavy workload as well. I contacted the folks at Stennis I had worked with before to see if they could help, and they said they would be glad to. With Stennis' help we were able to complete the procurements by the end of the fiscal year. Our employees learned that Stennis has a can-do attitude too and, if we need help, we can draw on resources elsewhere in the Agency as a team to accomplish our mission.

## How do you see your relationship with JSC, and how do you compare the two facilities?

We work very closely with JSC. I want to make sure that we continue the close working relationship that is required to meet the missions that we have before us.

Although we are considered a test facility and part of the Johnson Space Center, we are like a "mini-Center." We have an infrastructure similar to JSC such as security, emergency services, facility maintenance and operations, component services, cleaning and calibration services, warehousing, logistics, procurement, financial management, contract administration, information technology, etc., required to support the testing of various spacecraft components, materials and propulsion systems as well as maintaining White Sands Space Harbor.

## What are some of your goals for WSTF?

To improve safety performance. Safety is very important to me. I have found that the culture here is one that values safety, which is a result of the past managers like Joe Fries and others. That culture recognizes that safety is extremely important. When you are located in a hazardous test facility, you have to make sure that you are doing things safely.

We are not going to rest on our laurels relative to our current safety position – we want to do better and our employees are committed to doing that as well.

To provide excellent support for return to flight. Our support in the return to flight will involve ensuring all the thrusters required for the Shuttle are ready in a timely fashion. We are also working on hypervelocity and low-velocity impact testing. The data that we gather from this testing is going to be helpful in making good decisions to support the return to flight.

Provide excellent support to the Space Shuttle, International Space Station and other programs while preparing to support the development of the crew exploration vehicle and returning to the Moon.

Even though the Space Shuttle is to be retired by the end of the decade, there is still work ahead of us to support completing the International Space Station, which will require the Space Shuttle.

## How do you see your role in regard to the employees of White Sands?

I like to be directly involved with employees. I really enjoy getting to know folks. The people here have done a great job in making me feel a part of this team and part of the community.

We recently held a Safety and Total Health Day where one of the events was set up to show the managers how difficult it was to try to do a task while wearing personal protection equipment. The Honeywell program manager and I had a race to see who could complete the task first. This was a great way for management to get involved with our employees and get a feel for what they deal with relative to getting their jobs done.

## What would you like people to know about WSTF?

I want people to know that we at WSTF are proud to be part of the Johnson Space Center and are proud to support our nation's space program. We are looking forward to the new vision that President Bush has set out for us and in helping the Agency fulfill that vision.

I would also like to extend an invitation to all to come visit us. I believe you will recognize our tremendous capability to test and evaluate spacecraft materials, components and propulsion systems. More importantly, I believe you will find the people here very friendly and eager to help wherever they can as we work together to advance human exploration of space.



Steve Nunez using a WSTF Fire Department vehicle's PA system to address the WSTF population at the 2003 Safety and Total Health Day.

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Steve Nunez attempting to perform a manual task while wearing an ILC Dover protective suit during a PPE demonstration at WSTF's 2003 Safety and Total Health Day.

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(L to R) Mike Kirsch, NASA WSTF Deputy Manager; Cameron Dunlap; Steve Nunez, NASA WSTF Manager; Mark Leifeste, Honeywell Program Manager; Bob Kowalski at WSTF's 2003 Safety and Total Health Day.

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