In October 2015, Charles Elachi announced that he will be leaving the Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL), after serving for fifteen years as director of this leading organization in the domain of space exploration.

His successor has just been announced: Michael Watkins, director of the Center for Space Research at The University of Texas at Austin and Cockrell School of Engineering Chair. He officially begins his duties as director of JPL and Vice-President of the California Institute of Technology (Caltech) on July 1, 2016.

Michael Watkins is no stranger to JPL: between 1993 and 2015, he has been at the heart of NASA leading several of the institute prestigious programs, many of which being French-American collaborations. For instance, he lead the team in charge of the systems used in the framework of the Mars Space Laboratory (MSL) mission, which deployed the Curiosity Mars rover, a project that CNES was heavily involved in via the development of high tech instruments such as SAM and ChemCam. He also oversaw missions concerning the study of our own planet. A noteworthy example is his work on the two satellites, GRACE-1 and GRACE-2 (Gravity Recovery and Climate Experiment), whose SuperSTAR accelerometers were produced by CNES and the French Aerospace research center, ONERA.

Michael Watkins is clearly the ideal candidate for this prestigious institution. Charles Elachi expresses his approval of the search committee’s choice:

« His intimate knowledge of the lab and staff, combined with his highly diversified set of skills and knowledge base in science and engineering, will serve JPL very well in the years to come. »