

COMMITTEE ON
**SCIENCE, SPACE, AND
TECHNOLOGY**
CHAIRMAN LAMAR SMITH



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Statement of Subcommittee Chairman Brian Babin (R-Texas)
The International Space Station: Addressing Operational Challenges

Chairman Babin: Since 2013, the ISS program has experienced a number of challenges. As a can-do nation, America has always been committed to identifying challenges, addressing them and advancing to reach our destiny. We have that same commitment with the ISS. During this time, astronauts have experienced water leaks in their suits three times, with one incident occurring during a spacewalk. On April 26, 2013, an unmanned Russian Progress cargo vehicle damaged a laser radar reflector when docking with the ISS. On January 14, 2015, a false alarm of an ammonia leak caused the crew to retreat into the Russian segment. On October 28, 2014, an Orbital Science's unmanned cargo launch failed just after launch. On April 28, 2015, a separate Russian Progress cargo vehicle failed to reach the ISS. On June 7, 2015, a planned re-boost of the ISS using a docked Progress vehicle failed but eventually was successful after troubleshooting. On June 10, 2015, a visiting Soyuz vehicle unexpectedly fired its engines without being commanded. Most recently, on June 28, 2015, a SpaceX unmanned cargo launch failed as well.

All of these incidents highlight the challenges of operating in space, and remind us that NASA's contractors, engineers, and astronauts must be ever vigilant. These events have challenged ISS operations, but the fact that the program was able to effectively respond to these set-backs is a testament to NASA, the ISS partners, and the contractors. We do not know the root causes of some of the accidents yet, but once we have more information, we will be better suited to review those individual events. In the meantime, this hearing allows us to evaluate the operational status of the ISS, review efforts to utilize the unique asset, and assess the prospects for future operations.

The ISS is one of the most complex and expensive man-made objects ever built. The American taxpayer currently invests approximately three billion dollars per year in this laboratory. We must ensure that every dollar is spent effectively and efficiently. The ISS offers a unique microgravity environment for scientists and engineers to utilize. NASA recently released its "Benefits to Humanity" publication this week detailing the many benefits that ISS provides back to our lives here on Earth. From advances in our understanding of human health and performance to our use of new materials to the utilization of robotics and satellites, the benefits we receive from the ISS are many and diverse.

In addition to the benefits back on Earth the ISS offers the conditions necessary to prepare and develop critical technologies for deep space and long-duration human spaceflight missions. Successive NASA Authorizations direct the Administration to utilize the ISS for this purpose. The Human Research Program and Advanced Exploration Systems program at NASA are on the cutting edge of developing the systems we need to send humans deeper into the Solar System than ever before. Right now, Captain Mark Kelly is on day 104 of his year-long mission to study the effects of long duration human spaceflight.

In addition to the utilization efforts of NASA's research programs, the NASA Authorization Act of 2005 designated part of the ISS as a National Lab and the NASA Authorization Act of 2010 directed the Administration to sign a cooperative agreement with a non-profit to manage it. NASA selected the Center for the Advancement of Science in Space, or CASIS, to lead this effort. The Government Accountability Office noted in a recent report that CASIS has made great strides in fulfilling the mandate under the law but that more work needed to be done to ensure that measurable progress was being made in a quantifiable manner. I hope to hear from NASA today that the agency is making progress towards answering this recommendation from GAO.

As we keep an eye on the present operation and utilization of the ISS, we must also look to the future. Last year the Administration announced support for the extension of the ISS program from 2020 to 2024. At present, federal law limits the life of the ISS to 2020. Absent action from Congress to extend it, the Administration would be required to begin closeout of the program.

There are many questions about the request for this extension. The bipartisan, House-passed NASA Authorization of 2015 requires the Administration to provide a report to Congress on efforts by the Administration to utilize the ISS and how to quantify benefits back to the Nation for the required investment for extension. It also requires the Administration to develop a government-wide utilization plan for the ISS to ensure that every minute the facility is in orbit we are doing what we can to get the most out of it. These reports are critical for Congress to understand the issues that inform whether to extend the ISS.

This Committee has a responsibility to ensure that the American taxpayers are getting all that they can from every dollar they send to the Federal Government. I believe this investment is worthwhile and that the benefits far outweigh the cost. Support for the ISS and its operations and utilization is not a partisan issue, it is an American issue and I look forward to working with my friends on the other side of the aisle and our partners in the space industry to understand how we can all meet the operational challenges facing the ISS program.

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