



National Aeronautics and
Space Administration

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Committee on Science, Space, and Technology Subcommittee on Space and Aeronautics

U.S. House of Representatives

Statement by:

Joel R. Montalbano, Associate Administrator (acting), Space Operations Mission Directorate,
National Aeronautics and Space Administration

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**Statement of Joel R. Montalbano
Acting Associate Administrator
Space Operations Mission Directorate
National Aeronautics and Space Administration**

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Chairman Haridopolos, Ranking Member Foushee, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear today to discuss NASA's human spaceflight activities in low Earth orbit (LEO). Since 1998, NASA and our international, interagency, and commercial partners have used the International Space Station (ISS) to expand scientific research, technology development, and economic activities into the unique microgravity environment beyond Earth. Last November, we celebrated the milestone of 25 years of continuous human presence aboard ISS. During that time, we have looked back at our home planet, increasing our knowledge of the atmosphere, oceans, and land. We have increased our knowledge of the effects of space on the human body, helping us to better understand disease and develop new treatments to lengthen and improve lives on Earth. Through the ISS, we are learning critical lessons that will enable America's return to the Moon through the Artemis program and humanity's next steps into deep space, to Mars, deepening and broadening international partnerships, as well as promoting the development of a sustainable commercial market in LEO.

ISS has grown into an outpost housing up to seven crew for long-duration missions, increasing research time significantly. ISS astronauts have worked with many highly skilled researchers on the ground to conduct scientific experiments in areas such as medicine, plant and animal biology, biotechnology, fundamental physics, crystal growth, combustion science, and fluid physics. NASA's Human Research Program has contributed to the reduction of both in-mission and long-duration human spaceflight risk across multiple discipline areas. Instruments on the ISS gather Earth science and monitor cosmic rays to increase our understanding of the universe, including antimatter and dark matter. On April 8, 2026, NASA will be sending an upgraded model of its Cold Atom Laboratory (CAL) to continue advancing groundbreaking quantum microgravity research. NASA is planning to upgrade the Department of Energy-led Alpha Magnetic Spectrometer-02 (AMS) experiment, with hardware to be flown to ISS in late 2026 and spring 2027 and installed during a series of spacewalks. Upgrading this one-of-a-kind instrument will maximize the spectrometer's science return, providing data on the composition of cosmic rays to a far greater accuracy than Earth-based instruments can achieve due to interactions with the atmosphere.

Beyond its importance as a research facility, ISS is the main destination for the U.S. commercial transportation of crews and cargo to Earth orbit, providing a foundation for services available to other customers. Development of domestic launch vehicles for these spacecraft has resulted in the reemergence of the United States as the global leader in space launch services. SpaceX's Dragon and Northrop Grumman's Cygnus cargo ships – including the new Cygnus XL – regularly supply research experiments and consumables to the station. SpaceX's Crew Dragon has flown 12 contracted missions to ISS since its crewed demonstration flight in May 2020, and SpaceX and its partner Axiom have flown four Private Astronaut Missions (PAMs) to ISS aboard Crew Dragon, with a fifth and sixth to be flown with partners Axiom and Vast, respectively, in 2027. NASA will continue to work closely with Boeing to fully understand and solve the technical challenges with the Starliner vehicle, alongside incorporating the investigative recommendations before flying the next mission. The Agency is taking corrective actions in an effort to ensure the lessons learned contribute to crew and mission safety of future Starliner flights and all NASA programs.

In addition to the Cygnus XL, the ISS crew recently welcomed another new type of spacecraft to station with the launch and berthing of Japan's HTV-X1 cargo vehicle in October 2025. This upgraded version of the original Japanese HII Transfer Vehicle (HTV), was recently released from station to perform several weeks of scientific experiments in orbit before entering Earth's atmosphere at the end of its mission.

NASA is looking for every opportunity to prioritize the highest-value science on ISS, streamline flight clearance of experiments, and remove friction that delays progress. Our objective is to maximize every bit of life remaining on the space station and unlock an orbital economy that generates demand for multiple future commercial stations and ultimately enables more people living and working in space.

After the retirement of ISS, NASA will continue its scientific research and technology work in LEO by transitioning to services provided by one or more Commercial LEO Destinations (CLDs). We have partnered with industry teams to begin development of CLDs, including: Axiom Hab (Axiom Space); Orbital Reef (Blue Origin, Sierra Space); and Starlab (Voyager Space, Airbus, Northrop Grumman). In addition, in June 2023, the Agency awarded seven unfunded Space Act Agreements under the Collaboration for Commercial Space Capabilities-2 (CCSC-2) effort to further support the development of capabilities relevant to the Agency's exploration strategy. Besides supporting the Artemis program, the future of human deep space exploration, and NASA science objectives, NASA's strategy will spur private sector initiative and a commercial pathway to replace the International Space Station by 2030. It is NASA's goal to be one of many customers in a robust commercial marketplace in LEO where in-orbit destinations, as well as cargo and crew transportation, are available as services to the Agency. At the same time, LEO human spaceflight is complex, and a robust LEO economy does not exist yet, so NASA will need to work hard to ensure that the CLD-based future is successful.

Working with its partners, NASA is at an inflection point, poised to continue groundbreaking research and development on ISS, foster the development of commercial capabilities enabling continuity of U.S. human presence in LEO, and safely retire the ISS at the end of operations as we usher in a new era of commercial space development that will transform LEO into an arena of vibrant economic activity.

Thank you once again for inviting me to appear before you today. I would be pleased to respond to any questions the Members of the Subcommittee may have.