



U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES COMMITTEE ON
SCIENCE, SPACE, & TECHNOLOGY

Opening Statement

Ranking Member Zoe Lofgren (D-CA)

Space and Aeronautics Subcommittee Hearing:
ISS and Beyond: The Present and Future of American Low-Earth Orbit Activities

February 14, 2024

Good morning, and thank you Chairman Babin and Ranking Member Sorensen for holding today's hearing. The Science Committee is often referred to as the committee of the future, and so the future of low Earth orbit is a fitting topic to be considering today.

The International Space Station—the ISS—has laid the foundation for America's future in low Earth orbit and beyond. It demonstrates our increasingly important leadership of a 15-nation partnership. This is a strategic and soft-power capability for the U.S. that is as important today as it was in 1998 when the ISS Intergovernmental Agreement was signed.

The ISS has also enabled the growth of our U.S. commercial launch industry. NASA's investments in ISS commercial crew and cargo capabilities have reinvigorated our U.S. commercial launch industry bringing us positive economic impact and competitiveness.

In addition, the ISS has served as a long-term, orbiting microgravity laboratory.

It enables basic and applied research, such as the work of the Space Biosciences Division at NASA Ames just outside my District, and provides a platform for other Federal government agencies and commercial entities to carry out R&D.

The ISS, however, won't last forever. It is aging and is currently only authorized to operate through 2030. NASA wants to continue to use low Earth orbit for research, technology risk reduction, and other activities. NASA plans to transition those efforts to commercial space stations for which NASA plans to be one of many customers.

There are many questions on how this transition will be implemented that I hope will be answered today. However, in many ways, this hearing is a convergence of the two major space policy areas the Committee has and will be considering over the 118th Congress—commercial space regulatory frameworks and NASA reauthorization. Legislatively, this Committee must balance the interests of both the U.S. government, including NASA, and the commercial space industry, all while ensuring responsibility over U.S. taxpayer investments.

I want to highlight a few areas important to that balance.

First, Congress must gain clarity on the risks of transitioning national and government activities to nongovernmental entities. These risks might include a potential gap in U.S. presence in low Earth

orbit; the safety of NASA's astronauts; the financial risks to the U.S. government should NASA end up representing the only sustainable market for commercial space stations; and the liability risks to the U.S. government, which is responsible for all U.S. nongovernmental activities in space. This Committee must settle policy on who will bear those risks.

Second, this Committee and Congress must also consider the nature of government-funded research and development in a post-ISS environment. While it is critical that NASA ensure a seamless transition from the ISS to commercial platforms, I don't want the essential role of government-sponsored microgravity research and development to get lost in the shuffle. The U.S. government and this Committee have a responsibility to ensure that such an outcome does not occur.

The United States is no longer alone in this domain. China established its crewed Tiangong space station in low Earth orbit and is investing in much of the same cutting-edge science that we'll hear more about today. Space biological and physical research directly enables human exploration. We need to lead in science to lead on the Moon and Mars.

Finally, I want to voice my concern about the budgetary challenges and dysfunctional appropriations process that stand to threaten our nation's plans in space, if we in Congress are not prepared to appropriate the required resources. Continuing to operate the ISS while also procuring a deorbit vehicle and providing support to commercial LEO destinations requires sustained investments if we are to ensure America's leadership in low Earth orbit.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and I yield back the balance of my time.