



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

Opening Statement

**Ranking Member Eric Sorensen (D-IL)  
of the Subcommittee on Space and Aeronautics**

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

February 14, 2024

Good morning. Thank you, Chairman Babin, for holding today's hearing, "ISS and Beyond: The Present and Future of American Low-Earth Orbit Activities." I want to extend a warm welcome to our expert witnesses. Thank you for being here.

This year will mark 24 years of continuous crew occupation on the International Space Station, a long and cohesive international partnership of 15 countries, with over 3000 experiments carried out to date.

Last year, I was proud to host NASA astronaut, Dr. Kate Rubins, in my district. During her visit, Dr. Rubins spoke about her excitement for the upcoming generation. She believes that first graders are the perfect age to one day go to Mars. What an exciting possibility for our nation's children! The scientific research currently done on the ISS is critical to getting to Mars.

I want to recognize the talented and dedicated NASA workforce and the NASA astronauts Jasmin Moghbeli, and Loral O'Hara, as well as European astronaut Andreas Mogensen, and Japanese astronaut Furukawa Satoshi who are orbiting 250 miles above us today. These brave astronauts make our present and future in low Earth orbit (LEO) possible. The ISS is an international success story the world can be proud of. And I believe there is much more to come.

In Congress' most recent NASA Authorization, ISS operations were extended through the end of 2030 with planned deorbiting to follow. This hearing is intended to examine how close we are to maintaining this timeline. Continuing to benefit from this incredible laboratory requires that NASA take prompt action. We must replace aging ISS space suits that could pose risks to astronauts, and we must develop a deorbit vehicle in time to safely control the station's return to earth over the Pacific Ocean without risking lives on the ground. According to the Congressionally chartered Aerospace Safety Advisory Panel the safety of deorbiting the ISS "is not completely in [NASA's] hands." This is because "a catastrophic failure could occur with little or no warning." Furthermore, NASA is planning to transition from being owner and operator of the ISS to user and customer of one or more commercial space stations.

As we nurture the success of ISS today, we must vigilantly prepare for the future of Low Earth Orbit. It is a consequential shift, and we need to get it right. Many questions remain at this time:

What will be the roles for government and nongovernment in this changing Low Earth Orbit model? What are the geopolitical implications of ending an “International” space station?

Who will be responsible for the safety of NASA’s astronauts on commercial space stations? Is there a market to support a commercial low Earth orbit enterprise? How will the science currently done aboard the ISS continue during the change? Should there be a national laboratory in low Earth orbit?

The year 2030 is not far off. I hope today’s hearing provides fulsome answers as this Committee looks to continue its important role in providing clear direction to guide America’s future in low Earth orbit. A new decade of science that both inspires and enables our continued leadership awaits us. The United States must seize this moment.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and I yield back.