

## Lawmakers discuss the future of the International Space Station

June 6, 2018

In response to President Donald Trump's request to terminate direct federal funding to the International Space Station (ISS) by 2025, lawmakers in the House and Senate held several hearings to discuss the future of the ISS.

The Senate Subcommittee on Space, Science, and Competitiveness held the first in a series of two hearings on May 16. The hearing, titled "Examining the Future of the International Space Station: Administration Perspectives," focused on the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's (NASA) perspectives on the feasibility of transitioning the ISS into a partially commercial operation by the year 2024. In 2017, the NASA Transition Authorization Act (S. 442) was signed into law, authorizing federal funding for the ISS through 2024, with direction for NASA to pursue international, commercial, and intragovernmental means of ISS logistics, thus alleviating the need for complete federal funding. However, NASA Associate Administrator William Gerstenmaier testified that industries will not be ready to take on ISS investments, or other low earth orbit (LEO) projects and partnerships, by 2025. According to NASA officials, with over \$100 billion already devoted to the construction and maintenance of the ISS since its inception, the facility can remain functional until at least 2028. Subcommittee Chairman Ted Cruz (R-TX) and Ranking Member Bill Nelson (D-FL) indicated that there is bipartisan congressional support for continuing federal support for the ISS and its premature cancellation would be a waste of the significant investment made by taxpayers.

On May 17, the House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology held a hearing titled "America's Human Presence in Low-Earth Orbit," which reflected conversations that took place during the Senate hearing. Representative Brian Babin (R-TX-36), chairman of the Subcommittee on Space, stated that the United States should maintain an LEO presence to support the nation's future journeys to the moon and deep space. Other witnesses expressed their agreement with Representative Babin and further discussed the options for both partial and full transition to commercial usage of the ISS. Committee Chairman Lamar Smith (R-TX-1) recognized that, due to budget constraints, lawmakers would be required to make tough cuts to certain programs such as the ISS to enable these space exploration missions to take place, although he agreed that LEO is essential for these missions and for continued scientific research.

The second Senate subcommittee hearing, titled "Examining the Future of the International Space Station: Stakeholder Perspectives" was held on June 6. At this hearing, ISS stakeholders shared their perspectives on the proposed 2025 termination date and discussed the value and current state of research in LEO. Witnesses from the Boeing Company and Axiom Space testified that prematurely cancelling the ISS in 2025 would be devastating for scientific advancement, jobs, and the potential of commercial research in LEO. Cynthia Bouthot, a representative from Center for the Advancement of Science in Space, explained that businesses would be hesitant to commit to projects or partnerships if the termination date is unclear.

*Sources: Library of Congress; National Aeronautics and Space Administration; U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Science, Space, and Technology; U.S. Senate, Committee on Science, Commerce, and Transportation.*

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