

Opening Statement of
The Honorable Ralph Hall
Before the Space and Aeronautics Subcommittee Hearing on
NASA's International Space Station: Status and Issues
April 24, 2008

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for calling this morning's timely hearing on the status of the International Space Station. I want to begin by thanking our witnesses for taking time out of their busy schedules to be here. Some of you have traveled considerable distance, and I want to assure all of you that your wisdom and expertise are greatly valued by me and other Members of the Committee.

Mr. Chairman, the International Space Station is well on its way to completion and, if NASA successfully flies out its remaining schedule of flights over the next two years, it will be capable of conducting a wide array of world class science. The United States and its international partners have invested tens of billions of dollars to assemble the most complex and largest laboratory and living facility ever to fly in space. The fruits of this investment are only now capable of being realized.

But having said that, a number of critical questions and challenges remain to be answered, both with respect to completing assembly of station, and once accomplished, using the station as a one-of-a-kind laboratory to conduct research in a microgravity environment. Issues that bear discussion include the status of the two contingency flights; is NASA committed to flying them or not? Will the United States be able to reliably and safely move crew and cargo to and from station during the five-year gap between

retirement of Shuttle and advent of the Orion/Ares launch system? How safe is Soyuz in light of the most recent pair of re-entries that did not perform as expected? I hope our NASA witness, Mr. Gerstenmaier, will be able to spend a couple of minutes in his opening testimony talking about Soyuz performance problems and potential solutions.

I am also concerned about NASA's plans to fully exploit the station's research and testing capabilities, and how it intends to maximize its utility as a National Research Laboratory. Several of our witnesses will offer helpful insights and suggestions stemming from their experiences.

By raising these questions, I don't mean to appear critical of NASA's management of ISS. In fact, I want to applaud Mr. Gerstenmaier and the men and women of NASA, and their contractor teams, for making the difficult task of building the station look relatively routine. I can only imagine the amount of detailed planning, design, and consultation, as well as negotiating with our international partners, that went into this effort. It has always been one of NASA's greatest strengths, and perhaps one of its biggest public relations challenges, to make the highly dangerous and complex task of spaceflight look benign.

I want to again thank our witnesses for joining us this morning, and I look forward to hearing their testimony. Thank you.