

## OPENING STATEMENT

**The Honorable Steven M. Palazzo (R-MS), Chairman**

Subcommittee on Space and Aeronautics

*The International Space Station: Lessons from the Soyuz Rocket Failure and Return to Flight*

October 12, 2011

Good afternoon. Today's hearing has been called to examine the consequences of the August 24 launch failure of a Russian Progress cargo vehicle carrying supplies to the International Space Station, and the implications of the failure on ISS operations. The Progress launch vehicle is very similar to those used to carry astronauts in a Soyuz capsule to ISS, and for at least the next five years, the Soyuz launch system and crew capsule is the only means of ferrying astronauts to and from station.

Our dependence on the Russians should come as no surprise to anyone in this room. In the aftermath of the *Columbia* shuttle accident, the previous Administration proposed retiring the Shuttle and developing a follow-on system that we all knew as Constellation. Two different Congress' approved this plan in NASA authorization bills that were passed in 2005 and 2008.

In order to make the transition as affordable as possible, the Shuttle was to be retired first and the funds freed up from that program would then be applied to developing the Constellation launchers and crew capsule. And as part of that transition, it was clearly acknowledged that NASA would be fully reliant on the Russian Soyuz to carry astronauts to and from station until we had a successor system developed. It would appear however that we may well end up being dependent on the Russians for more years than was originally anticipated as a result of struggles between this Administration and Congress following the cancellation of the Constellation program.

It's perhaps an ugly coincidence that one month following the Shuttle's final flight, the Progress accident occurred, forcing Roscosmos and its supplier-base to reexamine their designs and quality assurance programs to account for the third stage failure. I am hopeful our witnesses will be able to shed light on the accident investigation board's findings, the degree of insight offered by Roscosmos into the workings and deliberations of the accident investigation board, and offer their views about Russia's plans for re-certifying the launcher.

The failure also caused NASA to contemplate the real possibility that the ISS would have to be de-crewed if there were any extended delays in understanding and resolving the root causes of the accident.

While I understand that ISS can safely operate without crew aboard, there is always the risk of the unknown system failure, or worse, a debris hit that damages the integrity of the habitation modules. And after some point in time, the capability of safely returning a crew may become more and more in doubt, depending on the overall performance of the station's array of systems.

Finally, I would note that construction of the station was only recently completed; it has a finite lifetime of useful service before its systems become too unreliable and difficult to maintain. Thus it is imperative that we take advantage of its many capabilities before maintenance becomes a major concern.

I want to welcome our guests for taking time from their busy schedules to appear before us today. I realize any appearance before a Congressional panel entails considerable time and effort, and I want you to know that your expertise and wisdom will be very helpful to this committee and Congress.

Mr. Gerstenmaier, I want you to know that we're looking forward to your oral statement to answer the questions posed in our letter of invitation for today's hearing. I understand you were traveling internationally last week and weren't available to help draft the written testimony, which, while it provided information about the ISS's ability to operate without crew aboard, was not responsive to questions regarding the Progress failure and recovery plan. I am counting on your oral statement to fill in the missing details.