

NASA Astronaut Gives First Congressional Testimony From Space

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WASHINGTON, June 15 (SPX) -- NASA's astronaut aboard the International Space Station (ISS) made history Tuesday becoming the first to testify before Congress while in orbit.

Expedition 11 crew member John Phillips appeared via satellite before the House Science Committee, Subcommittee on Space and Aeronautics, chaired by Rep. Ken Calvert, R-Calif.

Phillips answered questions from subcommittee members about what it is like to live and work in space, focusing on the Space Station's role in preparing humans for longer-duration missions outlined in NASA's Vision for Space Exploration.

"We constantly learn new lessons up here," Phillips said, while traveling through space at five miles per second. "The experiences we gather will enable us to establish a long-term station on the moon and to go on to Mars."

Two other astronauts, Peggy Whitson, who served on the Station from June 7 to Nov. 25, 2002, as a member of the fifth crew, and Mike Fincke, a member of the ninth ISS crew from April 21 to Oct. 23, 2004, testified in person before the subcommittee.

Phillips and Russian Cosmonaut Sergei Krikalev are the 11th crew to live on board the Station. For most members of Congress, talking to Phillips was their first opportunity to speak directly with a space traveler.

In response to members' questions, Phillips talked about the tremendous view from 220 miles up, floated around the Station to demonstrate his weightlessness and talked about the hard work he's doing.

The astronauts described several important experiments conducted on the Station, including one that will determine the ability of minimally-trained individuals to perform advanced ultrasound examinations after using a computer-based training program.

This technology could have widespread application in emergency situations and for rural areas where trained specialists are sometimes unavailable.

In addition to the formal research, Phillips also pointed out, "The most important thing up here is that we are the experiment, we are learning how to fly in space."

"A full time human presence aboard the Space Station offers us a tremendous opportunity to study human survival in the hostile environment of space and assess how to overcome the technological hurdles to human exploration beyond Earth orbit," Whitson said.

Fincke testified the Station is also important for inspiring the next generation of explorers. "I think that imagination is still among our youth. It's up to us to ... let them know that America is the land of opportunity and you, too, can be an astronaut and an engineer. Because this is the place where dreams come true," he said.

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