

US Space Chief: Shuttle Ready for Launch

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by David McAlary

Washington DC (VOA) Jun 28, 2005 -- The head of the U.S. space agency, NASA, says the space shuttle appears ready to return to flight next month, after a two-and-a-half-year moratorium on missions. NASA Administrator Michael Griffin spoke to Congress the day after an expert commission said the shuttle was safe to fly, despite the lack of progress on some safety modifications.

Mr. Griffin became NASA chief only two months ago, but says he has immersed himself in the technology of the safety improvements recommended by aviation experts who investigated the loss of the shuttle Columbia in 2003.

He told the U.S. House of Representatives Science Committee that the orbiter Discovery looks set for a July 13 launch to become the first shuttle to take off in two-and-a-half years.

"We look like we're in pretty good shape there and I think based on what I know now, we're ready to go," said Mr. Griffin.

NASA shuttle managers will make the final launch determination later this week after a two day review of Discovery's flight readiness.

A commission of independent aviation experts NASA asked to assess the safety upgrades says the agency has fallen short on some of them, but in general has made the three remaining shuttles safe enough to fly again. The commissioners praised the work NASA has done to advance shuttle

safety and Mr. Griffin echoes that view.

"I believe I have acquired a pretty good picture of where we are with respect to the technical requirements to return to flight," he added. "I've been tremendously impressed with the work that the team has done executing those improvements. The flight readiness review for the next couple of days will either uncover exception to that statement or will endorse it."

When shuttle flights resume, they will continue the process of building the International Space Station, which the United States operates with Russia with support from Europe, Canada, and Japan.

But a legal constraint could interfere with U.S. participation in the project. A five-year-old U.S. law forbids NASA to pay the Russian space agency for station services unless Washington confirms that Moscow has not provided Iran with missile or weapons technology in the previous year.

This has not been much of a problem so far, but under current plans, the United States will rely on Russia for emergency escape transportation back to Earth for its crewmembers once the station is completed.

The law would bar that service and, in effect, prohibit U.S. activities on the outpost except when a shuttle is docked there.

NASA chief Griffin says his agency, like the U.S. State Department, supports an amendment to change the law.

House Science Committee member Dana Rohrabacher says the law has failed to stop Iran's nuclear weapons program. He blames the Bush administration and the previous Clinton government for not taking diplomatic steps to prevent Moscow's technical help to Tehran.

"What needed to happen was some type of overture to the Russians that would give them an alternative. Neither administration did its job in the past and now you, after two months as being leader of NASA, are faced with this very serious time period when decision have to be made," he said.

NASA administrator Griffin says this situation is a major reason why he wants to replace the aging shuttle fleet by 2010 with a more agile astronaut craft that will allow the United States to maintain its independence in space.

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