

NASA Had No Choice But To Buy Soyuz Flights

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NASA's announcement last week that it will pay Roskosmos \$43.6 million for a round-trip ride to the International Space Station this spring, and an equivalent figure for an as-yet-undetermined number of future flights to the station until 2012, represents the agency's acknowledgment that it had no alternative.

The deal was reached recently between the two space agencies after Congress last October amended the Iran Nonproliferation Act to permit NASA to conduct commerce with its Russian counterpart. The act had prohibited such transactions, because the both the Clinton and Bush administrations determined that the Russian government was aiding the development of Iran's nuclear program.

The fact that both the Bush administration and Congress agreed on the need to exempt ISS activities from the prohibition underscores the desperate situation in which NASA finds itself regarding manned spaceflight.

"If the U.S. is to maintain a presence on the ISS and take advantage of the billions invested in the facility, we must rely on the Russians," Joe Pouliot, a spokesman for the House Science Committee, which oversees NASA, told SpaceDaily.com.

"It's clear we have to rely on Soyuz and Progress, and we definitely have to pay for it," Pouliot said.

Such comments sum up NASA's predicament succinctly. Since February 1, 2003, when shuttle Columbia disintegrated during re-entry over the Southwestern United States, and with only the exception of shuttle Discovery's 14-day mission beginning last July 25, the U.S. space program has lacked any capability of putting humans into orbit.

The subsequent re-grounding of the shuttle program after Discovery's problem-plagued flight dashed any hopes of a return to regular and frequent missions.

The Congressional Research Service reached more or less identical conclusions in an analysis of the situation completed early last year. "A key issue is whether the nonproliferation benefits gained by linking the ISS to Russian proliferation behavior are worth the costs to the U.S. space program at this point in time," the CRS analysts wrote.

"From a space program perspective, the ... question is the extent to which NASA needs to have U.S. astronauts on the ISS for long duration missions between 2006 and 2010, and to have any astronauts there after 2010."

Under the new agreement, NASA will pay \$43.8 million for Roskosmos to fly U.S. astronaut Jeffrey Williams to the ISS in March, and return Bill McArthur, the current U.S. space station commander, home.

The amount also will cover the cost of a Soyuz craft if necessary as an emergency escape craft, and for training in Russia of a NASA astronaut who will replace Williams in September, NASA spokeswoman Melissa Mathews told reporters at a briefing last Thursday.

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