

NASA's Soyuz Deal Will Not Scrap Shuttle

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NASA's announcement last week that it will pay Roskosmos \$43.8 million to transport one astronaut to and another one from the International Space Station this year represents the agency's acknowledgment that it has no immediate alternative if it wishes to continue its presence and participation in the orbiting facility.

It does not mean, however, that the space agency is scrapping the space shuttle program until its Crew Exploration Vehicle is scheduled to begin low-Earth-orbit flights sometime in the next decade. Instead, NASA engineers will work to get the remaining three shuttles back to flight, because they remain the only hope the ISS construction will be completed.

"It's definitely a short-term contract for what we have to do now," NASA spokeswoman Melissa Mathews told SpaceDaily.com, although she added the two space agencies will negotiate an agreement for periodic launch and recovery services through 2011.

"We still need the shuttle for large station components," Mathews said. "They're simply too big to fit on (the Russian) Soyuz or Progress (spacecraft)."

The deal temporarily extends an existing contract and covers the Russians picking up and returning to Earth of Expedition 12 astronaut Bill McArthur from the station in March, and providing a round trip to the ISS of Expedition 13 crew member Jeff Williams to the facility, beginning next fall, all aboard a Soyuz. The contract also includes some

training, cargo and crew-rescue capability.

Last October, Congress permitted a resumption of space commerce between the United States and Russia when it amended the Iran Nonproliferation Act to permit NASA to pay Roskosmos for flights. 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 current 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."

NASA and Roskosmos actually signed their short-term contract before Congress approved the Iran Nonproliferation Act in 2000. Mathews said that in the intervening years the contract has been used to continue space-related activities in a very limited way.

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