

NASA chief in talks with companies about running ISS: report

June 5 2018, by Kerry Sheridan



US astronauts including Scott Tingle, pictured after landing from a mission, pay more than \$70 million per seat for a ride to the International Space Station on Russia's Soyuz spaceships

The head of the US space agency is in talks with several global

companies about taking over day-to-day operations at the International Space Station in the coming years, US media said on Tuesday.

NASA administrator Jim Bridenstine made the comments in an interview with The Washington Post.

"We're in a position now where there are people out there that can do commercial management of the International Space Station," said the former Oklahoma congressman who was sworn in as leader of the space agency in April.

"I've talked to many large corporations that are interested in getting involved in that through a consortium, if you will."

He did not reveal which companies are engaged in the talks.

The White House said earlier this year it would end direct funding of the orbiting outpost by 2025, a position that raised fierce opposition among some lawmakers.

The most vocal critic has been Texas Republican Senator Ted Cruz.

"As a fiscal conservative, you know one of the dumbest things you can do is cancel programs after billions in investment when there is still serious usable life ahead," Cruz said earlier this year.

\$100 billion space lab

The annual US investment in the space lab ranges from \$3 billion to \$4 billion.



NASA astronaut Serena Aunon-Chancellor waves during a press conference at the Russian-leased Baikonur cosmodrome in Kazakhstan before her scheduled launch on June 6, 2018 with two other crew members to the International Space Station

It cost \$100 billion to build and orbits about 250 miles (400 kilometers) above the Earth.

The football-field-sized space lab—which includes Russia, Japan, Canada and European partners—has been continuously occupied by astronauts since 2000.

Experts say the ISS's international character and reliance on global collaborations—along with US government involvement—could complicate US plans to privatize it.

The aerospace giant Boeing helped build the space station and has provided ongoing technical support.

The White House said in February it "will request market analysis and business plans from the commercial sector and solicit plans from commercial industry."

Mark Mulqueen, Boeing's space station program manager, was skeptical of the idea.

"Handing over a rare national asset to commercial enterprises before the private sector is ready to support it could have disastrous consequences for American leadership in space and for the chances of building space-focused private enterprise," he said at the time.



Jim Bridenstine became head of the US space agency NASA in April 2018

In The Washington Post interview on Tuesday, Bridenstine said a return to the Moon and the restoration of human spaceflight from United States soil are two of his top priorities.

Americans have not flown to space aboard US-made spaceships since 2011, when the 30-year space shuttle program was retired. Since then, astronauts have paid more than \$70 million per seat for a ride to the ISS on Russia's Soyuz spaceships.

NASA has announced a plan to build a new outpost that would orbit the Moon and act as a stepping off point for future deep space exploration,

and even missions to Mars.

Called the Lunar Gateway, it "prepares the United States for larger lunar robotic missions leading to a return of humans to the surface of the Moon," NASA has said.

The first components could launch as early as 2022 aboard NASA's powerful under-construction rocket, called the Space Launch System (SLS), and the Orion deep space capsule.

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