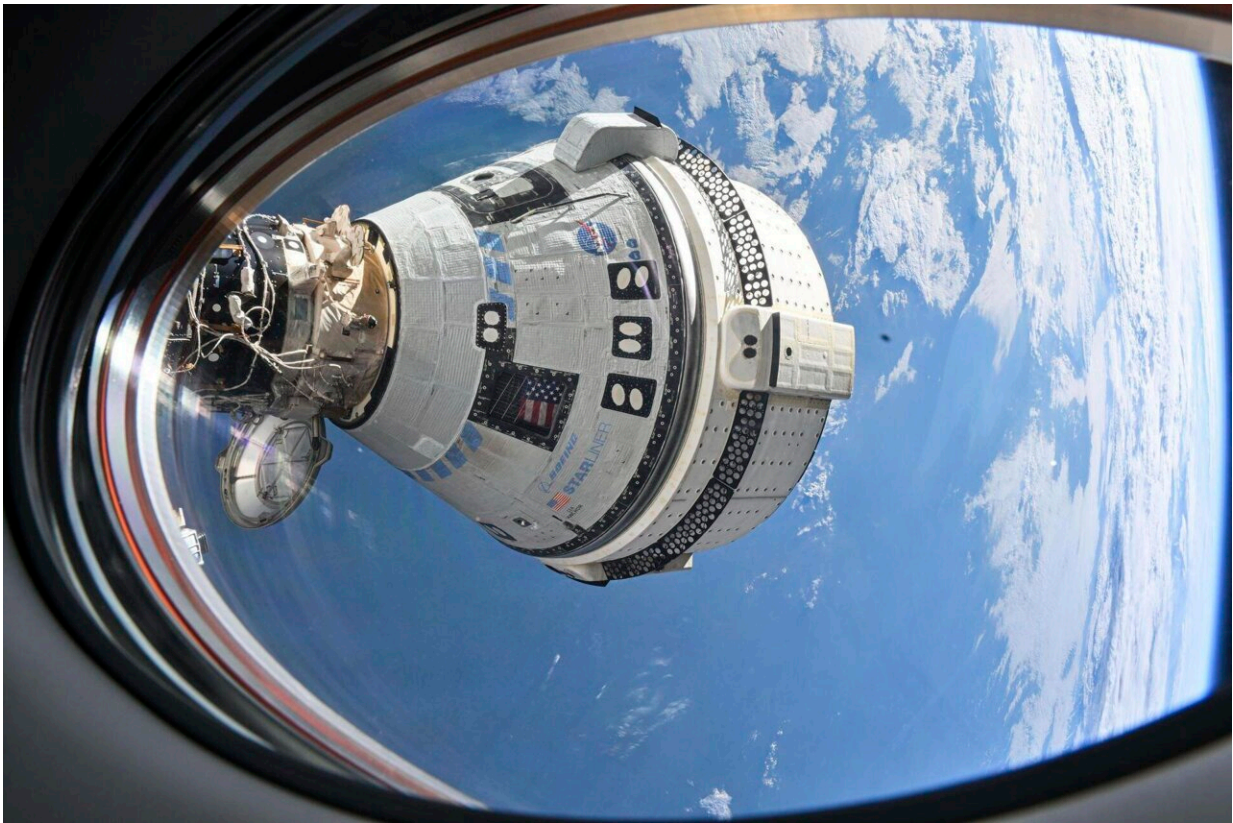


NASA still deciding whether to keep 2 astronauts at space station until next year

August 14 2024, by Marcia Dunn



This photo provided by NASA shows Boeing's Starliner spacecraft which launched astronauts Butch Wilmore and Suni Williams to the International Space Station docked to the Harmony module's forward port on July 3, 2024, seen from a window on the SpaceX Dragon Endeavour spacecraft docked to the adjacent port. Credit: NASA via AP

NASA said Wednesday it's still deciding whether to keep [two astronauts at the International Space Station](#) until early next year and send their [troubled Boeing capsule](#) back empty.

Rather than flying Boeing's Starliner back to Earth, [Butch Wilmore and Suni Williams](#) would catch a ride on [SpaceX's next flight](#). That option would keep them at the space station until next February.

The test pilots anticipated being away just a week or so when they rocketed away as Starliner's first crew. But [thruster failures and helium leaks](#) marred the capsule's trip to the space station, raising doubts about its ability to return safely and leaving the astronauts in limbo.

NASA officials said they're analyzing more data before making a decision by end of next week or beginning of the next. These thrusters are crucial for holding the capsule in the right position when it comes time to descend from orbit.

"We've got time available before we bring Starliner home and we want to use that time wisely," said Ken Bowersox, NASA's space operations mission chief.

NASA's safety chief Russ DeLoach added, "We don't have enough insight and data to make some sort of simple, black-and-white calculation."

DeLoach said the space agency wants to make room for all opinions unlike what happened on NASA's two shuttle tragedies, Challenger and Columbia, when dissenting views were ignored.

"That may mean, at times, we don't move very fast because we're getting everything out, and I think you can kind of see that at play here," he said.

Switching to SpaceX would require bumping two of the four astronauts assigned to the next ferry flight, currently targeted for late September. Wilmore and Williams would take the empty seats in SpaceX's Dragon capsule once that half-year mission ends.



NASA astronauts Suni Williams, left, and Butch Wilmore stand together for a photo enroute to the launch pad at Space Launch Complex 41 Wednesday, June 5, 2024, in Cape Canaveral, Fla., for their liftoff on the Boeing Starliner capsule to the international space station. Credit: AP Photo/Chris O'Meara, File

Another complication: The space station has just two parking places for U.S. capsules. Boeing's capsule would have to depart ahead of the arrival of SpaceX's Dragon in order to free up a spot.

Boeing maintains Starliner could still safely bring the astronauts home. The company earlier this month posted a list of testing done on thrusters in space and on the ground since liftoff.

NASA would like to keep SpaceX's current crew up there until the replacements arrive, barring an emergency. Those four should have returned to Earth this month, but saw a seventh month added to their mission because of the uncertainty over Starliner, keeping them up there until the end of September. Most space station stays last six months, although some have gone a full year.

Wilmore and Williams are retired Navy captains who spent months aboard the space station years ago. They eased into space station work as soon as they arrived, helping with experiments and repairs.

"They will do what we ask them to do. That's their job as astronauts," said NASA chief astronaut Joe Acaba.

He added, "This mission is a test flight and as Butch and Suni expressed ahead of their launch, they knew this mission might not be perfect."

Eager to have competing services and backup options, NASA hired SpaceX and Boeing to transport astronauts to and from the space station after the shuttles retired in 2011.

SpaceX's first astronaut flight was in 2020. Boeing suffered so much trouble on its initial test flight without a crew in 2019 that a do-over was ordered. Then more problems cropped up, costing the company more than \$1 billion to fix before finally flying astronauts.

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