Plan Needed to Ensure Uninterrupted Access to the International Space Station

What GAO Found

Both of the Commercial Crew Program’s contractors, Boeing and Space Exploration Technologies Corporation (SpaceX), are making progress finalizing designs and building hardware for their crew transportation systems, but both contractors continue to delay their certification milestone (see figure). Certification is the process that the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) will use to ensure that each contractor’s system meets its requirements for human spaceflight for the Commercial Crew Program.

A House report accompanying H.R. 5393 included a provision for GAO to review the progress of NASA’s human exploration programs. This report examines the Commercial Crew Program, including (1) the extent to which the contractors have made progress towards certification and (2) how NASA’s certification process addresses safety of the contractors’ crew transportation systems. GAO analyzed contracts, schedules, and other documentation and spoke with officials from NASA, the Commercial Crew Program, Boeing, SpaceX, and two of NASA’s independent review bodies that provide oversight.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making five recommendations, including that NASA develop a contingency plan for ensuring a U.S. presence on the ISS and clarify how it will determine its risk tolerance for loss of crew. NASA concurred with three recommendations; partially concurred on the recommendation related to loss of crew; and non-concurred with a recommendation to report its schedule analysis to Congress. GAO believes these recommendations remain valid, as discussed in the report.

Why GAO Did This Study

In 2014, NASA awarded two firm-fixed-price contracts to Boeing and SpaceX, worth a combined total of up to $6.8 billion, to develop crew transportation systems and conduct initial missions to the ISS. In February 2017, GAO found that both contractors had made progress, but their schedules were under mounting pressure. The contractors were originally required to provide NASA all the evidence it needed to certify that their systems met its requirements by 2017.

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View GAO-18-476. For more information, contact Cristina T. Chaplain at (202) 512-4841 or chaplainc@gao.gov.