

Remarks at 2025 Commercial Space Conference

February 12, 2025

Chairman Brian Babin

Thank you for the introduction, Alicia. It's great to be with you all this afternoon and to see so many familiar faces in the crowd.

A little over a month ago, I had the privilege of being elected chairman of the House Science, Space, and Technology Committee. I am deeply honored to lead a committee that plays such a vital role in keeping the United States at the forefront of technological innovation and global competitiveness. We have a busy agenda this Congress and a lot of important work ahead of us.

The United States' prowess in space is important for not only economic competitiveness and international prestige, but also national security. NASA is the leader in space exploration and America is also home to the world's most robust commercial space sector. In fact, our space industry is what makes America the uncontested leader among spacefaring nations.

The U.S. is the world leader in launch capabilities, and home to a flourishing market of spacecraft manufacturers and operators, as well as businesses specializing in telecommunications, private space stations, and even lunar landing services.

As America continues to reach new heights in space exploration, it is critical that the U.S. government encourage, rather than constrain, the new and innovative developments of its commercial space sector.

We certainly have our work cut out for us this Congress. The last comprehensive NASA Authorization Act was passed in 2017. The last commercial space bill was passed almost a decade ago. Space activities have grown and changed considerably in that time. Operators face new challenges, such as navigating complex government approvals for space activities, in addition to more down-to-earth challenges such as contracting and export controls. There are many items on my to-do list, but maintaining a vibrant, prosperous commercial space sector is a top priority for this Committee.

Last Congress, the Space and Aeronautics Subcommittee heard from experts on the challenges associated with launch and reentry licensing.

In the early days of commercial spaceflight, Congress assigned the Secretary of Transportation the critical responsibility of encouraging launch and reentry, while also protecting public safety.

Resulting regulations created multiple license types that used prescriptive requirements, and often duplicated work conducted by other federal agencies or launch ranges. In an effort to update and streamline regulations, the first Trump Administration directed agencies to simplify space-related policies. This led to the FAA updating launch and reentry licensing, commonly referred to as “Part 450,” that established a performance-based vehicle operator license.

Although the new regulations were crafted with the best of intentions and on a compressed timeline, they are not without their challenges.

As we approach the five-year anniversary of Part 450, the Committee plans to review implementation to ensure that launch and reentry licensing is being conducted in the most efficient and effective manner possible. We also plan to consider whether the streamlining efforts effectively met the goals of the first Trump Administration's Space Policy Directive-2.

Our work on this particular matter starts today. I, along with Ranking Member Lofgren, are sending a letter requesting that the Government Accountability Office conduct an independent review of the FAA's implementation of these commercial launch and reentry regulations.

Our letter directs the GAO to work with FAA and industry partners to gather data on the licensing process, starting from an applicant's first engagement with the FAA and continuing through license denial or expiration.

This review will provide Congress with an objective look at existing procedures and offer insight into whether further improvements are needed through legislation or administrative action.

Another key topic the Committee will address is authorization and supervision of in-space activities. As most of you know, the United States has an obligation under Article 6 of the Outer Space Treaty to authorize and continually supervise the activities of its nationals, including nongovernmental actors in space. Over time, Congress has tasked agencies with overseeing specific space activities, including launch and reentry, use of radiofrequency spectrums by spacecraft, and space-based remote sensing.

The Committee received feedback from stakeholders that streamlining the process for authorization and supervision of in-space activities would facilitate further investment and encourage companies to incorporate in the U.S.

To that end, I introduced a bill last Congress that proposed a straightforward approach that ensured continued compliance with our international obligations in the least burdensome manner possible. This does not require a complex or confusing process; instead, the bill directed the Department of Commerce, to serve as the single point for authorization and supervision. It was, and still is, my goal to minimize unnecessary paperwork, lengthy review processes, and duplicative requirements for commercial space operators.

If the United States seeks to be the “forum of choice” for space operators, it is critical that we facilitate space commerce by establishing an appropriate framework for commercial space operators when working with the federal government.

Burdensome requirements push operators overseas; already, we have seen cases where, rather than navigate a byzantine process, private actors opt to obtain foreign authorizations from nations with far fewer regulatory requirements.

It is also worth noting that space is growing increasingly competitive. More nations engage in space activities each year, and many are not our allies. While we have an important obligation to ensure public safety, we are also operating against foreign adversaries who are not burdened by these regulatory concerns.

I believe the U.S. will have better long-term success in space exploration because we are taking advantage of the ingenuity of the private sector to achieve our goals. But if that private sector is tethered to Earth by red tape, I fear that when U.S. astronauts return to the Moon they will find a “No Trespassing” sign written in Mandarin.

Furthermore, we continue to work towards a more efficient and effective space situational awareness system that leverages the expertise of the private sector rather than standing up a duplicative and redundant government capability. I look forward to working with my colleagues in the House, the Senate, and the incoming Administration to build on the principles laid out in Space Policy Directive 3 related to space situational awareness.

Last Congress, I introduced the Commercial Space Act of 2023, which incorporated feedback from many of you in the audience today. We addressed these issues as part of that bill. I will be reintroducing commercial space legislation this year and will work tirelessly with my colleagues to get a bill to the president's desk.

While the success of America's space leadership is directly tied to its vibrant commercial space sector, it is also driven by a strong governmental space program. Another piece of legislation the Committee will consider this Congress is a NASA authorization bill.

We are in a race back to the Moon. As I said before, my top priority is ensuring U.S. astronauts return to the lunar surface and that we do so before the CCP.

By returning to the Moon and maintaining a human presence, America will have a key role in establishing standards of openness and freedom in operations that will guide deep space exploration for years to come.

We will use the Moon as a proving ground, allowing us to develop and test technologies needed for future deep space missions, including our ultimate goal of landing humans on Mars. We do not do this alone; we will return to the Moon with commercial and international partners.

The NASA authorization also provides important guidance for NASA's future activities in low Earth orbit, which is a primary focus of NASA's Johnson Space Center, which is located in my district.

The International Space Station is a technological marvel and has served us well for decades.

We must give careful thought to how both the International Space Station and upcoming commercial platforms will play a role in accomplishing the United States' objectives in low Earth orbit. And all of this must be accomplished in a funding environment that does not rely on significant budget increases.

I look forward to working with Ranking Member Lofgren and our colleagues to see a bill signed into law that provides NASA with urgently needed direction from Congress.

The future is bright for the commercial space sector in the United States, but success is not guaranteed. We can only be successful if we all work together with a common purpose. You can be assured you have a friend in Congress who believes wholeheartedly in that common purpose.

I thank you again for the invitation to be with you today and am eager to work with each of you to propel our space program upward and outward this Congress. If I can ever be of assistance to any of you, please don't hesitate to reach out to me or my staff.

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