

Space tourism solution for NASA budget woes?

June 27, 2001 Posted: 12:19 PM EDT | By Richard Stenger CNN

(CNN) -- Allowing wealthy guests to ride in empty space shuttle seats or bunk on the international space station could save NASA billions of dollars, space tourism advocates told congressional leaders.

Buzz Aldrin, the second person to walk on the moon, said the U.S. space program could have earned \$2 billion by filling unused seats on shuttle flights.



Former astronaut "Buzz" Aldrin, right, talks to Dennis Tito before testifying at a House subcommittee hearing on the future of citizen space travel.

"We Americans have spare seats for rich tourists. The space shuttle often flies with only five or six people, when it can hold seven or eight," Aldrin told the House Science Committee in a statement on Tuesday.

Since the shuttle was declared operational, more than 100 seats have gone unused, said Aldrin, who estimated the value of each roundtrip ticket at \$20 million.

Opening space to paying amateurs would boost the demand for transportation into orbit and eventually cut the cost of space access by up to 70 percent, added Aldrin, who followed in the lunar footsteps of Neil Armstrong on the Apollo 11 mission in 1969.

The former NASA astronaut said new launch vehicles developed in response to space tourism could help build space hotels and lift off with massive military payloads such as space-based lasers.

Paychecks for 10,000 Russians

A California investor became the first space tourist, paying Moscow \$20 million to tag along with two cosmonauts who visited Alpha for a week in May.

"Some Russian officials have said that Dennis Tito's check covered the entire out-of-pocket cost of launching the Soyuz rocket," Aldrin said.

Tito, who also attended the hearing, noted that the typical Russian space program worker makes about \$1,200 a year. "In a roundabout way I am responsible for the paychecks of 10,000 Russian aerospace workers for more than one year," he said.

The former NASA engineer, who once plotted rocket trajectories for planetary probes, suggested that space tourism could cut costs for NASA, which has come under fire because of the space station expenses.

Billions of dollars in NASA cost overruns prompted the White House to remove a pricey habitation module from upcoming federal budget requests. The planned living quarters would have at least doubled the occupancy capacity of Alpha, which now houses a crew of three.

Alpha as 'orbital hotel and spa'

The current station could easily make room for six residents, Tito said. It worked well during his visit without overloading life support systems.

Tito and his cosmonaut crewmates camped out in the Russian Zarya

module, while Alpha commander Yury Usachev and U.S. astronaut Jim Voss bunked in Russian Zvezda module. Astronaut Susan Helms slept in a "nook" in the U.S. Destiny science lab, he said. The added residents would require more flights of three-person Soyuz craft, which serve as emergency escape capsules.

Rick Tumlinson, president of the Space Frontier Foundation, said that too much attention was being given to transforming the unfinished space station into a tourist destination.

"Our goal should not be to convert (Alpha) into an orbital hotel and spa," he said in a statement before the hearing. "Space tourism is not the government's job."

However, Tumlinson envisioned the space station as an economic catalyst for a commercial community in space, including hotels in Alpha's neighborhood.