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NASA Says Shuttle Flights to Station Should Proceed

By WARREN E. LEARY

ASHINGTON, March 17 - A malfunctioning gyroscope on the International Space Station should not delay restarting space shuttle flights to the outpost, a NASA official said Thursday. The official added that there was no urgency to repair the steering device.

A circuit breaker outside the station shut down one of three remaining stabilizing gyros on Wednesday, leaving two to position the laboratory in space. Controllers will continue to try to repair the gyroscope from Earth and have decided not to plan hurriedly a spacewalk for astronauts to change the part, said William Gerstenmaier, the space station program manager.

"There is no immediate need to go repair this," Mr. Gerstenmaier said in a telephone news conference from the Johnson Space Center in Houston. "We're disappointed it occurred. But we'll go change it at the right time."

The malfunctioning circuit breaker was replaced in June in a spacewalk by the previous station crew. The problem appears to be in a transistor that controls one of 17 electrical channels. Because that has been involved with previous failures associated with the gyros, engineers are checking to see whether the gyros themselves are the source of the problem, Mr. Gerstenmaier said.

The two astronauts aboard the station have a spacewalk scheduled for March 28. Mr. Gerstenmaier said they would not be asked to add switching the circuit breaker to their schedule because the problem was not considered that urgent.

The shuttle Discovery is to resume flights in May for the first time since the Columbia disaster in 2003. On this test flight, the shuttle will dock at the station for detailed inspections. Its crew is scheduled for three spacewalks. It is possible that the shuttle crew could be asked to replace the bad circuit breaker, Mr. Gerstenmaier said.

The station has four spinning 600-pound gyroscopes to position it to control heating and orient its solar power panels toward the Sun. At least two are needed to stabilize the station. The task can also be carried out by small rocket thrusters on the Russian part of the station. One gyro went bad three years ago, and the Discovery is to carry a replacement.

Mr. Gerstenmaier said the station would be steady enough with the two working gyros, or with thrusters, for the Discovery to dock and carry out its mission, which includes transporting tons of supplies to the station.

Engineers and astronauts are giving the station added scrutiny as the program applies lessons learned from the Columbia accident, he said. The station program on Thursday issued a 210-page report detailing its post-Columbia improvements and new procedures.

The new tasks include asking astronauts performing routine maintenance to pay attention to wiring and other components that might deteriorate. The program is also examining ways to operate the station when NASA retires its shuttle fleet at the end of the decade, like stocking disposable spare parts aboard and adding solid-state lights that would consume less power and could be replaced less often.