

## **Opening Statement of NASA Safety and Mission Assurance Chief Bryan O'Connor – August 29, 2007**

In its final report, dated 27 July, 2007, the Astronaut Health Care System Review Committee found the following: “Interviews with flight surgeons and astronauts identified episodes of heavy use of alcohol by astronauts in the immediate preflight period which led to flight safety concerns. Two specific instances were described where astronauts had been so intoxicated prior to flight that flight surgeons and/or fellow astronauts raised concerns to local on-scene leadership regarding flight safety. However, the individuals were still permitted to fly.” In response, the Deputy Administrator appointed me to review the reported allegations. The purpose of my review was twofold: 1) Evaluate the Committee’s finding related to the inappropriate use or abuse of alcohol by astronauts in the immediate preflight (spaceflight) period, and 2) Evaluate relevant existing policies covering alcohol use and abuse. My approach to the review was to learn as much as I could about the reported allegations through interviews, data searches and history review. The goal was to establish the nature and scope of any flight crew alcohol abuse, thus enabling a more informed course of action in our policies, procedures, risk mitigation strategies, authority structure and communications systems.

The scope of the review was limited to spaceflight with focus on the activities on launch day from crew wakeup until launch. For this potential flight safety issue, the relevant question was, “Did we have a instance where a crewmember presented on launch morning in an impaired state, was observed as such by the flight surgeon or another crewmember, and then over their objections, was cleared to fly by operational management?” Consistent with our standard approach to anonymous safety concerns, my investigative method included search of over 1500 anonymous reporting system reports going back to 1987 when the NASA Safety Reporting System (NSRS) was put in place, and with the help of the NASA Safety Center, a search of literally tens of thousands of mishap and close call records going back that same length of time. I received inputs by phone, email and in person from over 90 individuals who have been involved in activities during the last few days before launch at both Kennedy Space Center and the Baikonour Cosmodrome in Kazakhstan. I heard from every one of our current operational flight surgeons, more than 80% of the current astronaut corps, and many former astronauts. I also talked to suit technicians, medical staff, operational managers, crew quarters managers, food service staff, and Closeout Crew technicians (the last people to see the crew before launch). To supplement this review, I reminded members of the flight community that they should use the hot lines and NASA Safety Reporting System for any flight safety information they felt reluctant to provide in the open forum of my review. Also, NASA is preparing a focused anonymous survey as a follow up; this survey will help to try to flush out any residual concerns in this and other areas covered by the Committee report.

Within the scope and limitations of this review, I was not able to verify any case in which an astronaut spaceflight crewmember was impaired on launch day or any case where any NASA manager disregarded recommendation by a flight surgeon or another crewmember that an astronaut crewmember not be allowed to fly on the Shuttle or Soyuz. Should such a situation present itself in the future, I am confident that there are reasonable safeguards in place to prevent an impaired crewmember from boarding a spacecraft. As for disregard for flight surgeon or crew safety concerns, I found that although there may be occasional disagreements among operations and medical team members, all parties understand their roles and authorities and the multiple safety reporting and appeal paths. This report makes one recommendation to improve flight surgeon oversight during launch day activities. I also found several areas in various NASA and other relevant policies that should be improved for scope and clarity, and this report has specific recommendations in the policy area. This review is complete, but I have reminded the workforce that any alcohol abuse or other flight safety threats should be reported in an open forum, or if necessary, through any one of the several anonymous reporting systems in place at NASA.