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Astronauts considered in NASA budget cuts

The White House has called for a 10-month study of the appropriate 'role and size' of the 64-member astronaut corps after the final shuttle mission next year.



Astronaut Nicholas Patrick participates in a third and final spacewalk to provide maintenance to the International Space Station. (Associated Press)

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By Mark K. Matthews, Orlando Sentinel

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Reporting from Washington — With NASA's budget under pressure and the space shuttle program set to retire, even the agency's most sacred cow — the 64-member astronaut corps — isn't safe from the possibility of cuts.

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At the behest of the White House, the nation's top science advisors this month began a 10-month study of the appropriate "role and size" of the astronaut corps after the final shuttle mission next year.

The study, by the National Academies, reflects two realities: NASA's budget, squeezed by congressional budget hawks and its own cost overruns, needs every penny. More significantly, the United States may not need all these astronauts.

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"Clearly, there won't be a lot of flying going on after the shuttle goes away," said Leroy Chiao, a former astronaut and a member of the 2009 presidential commission that examined NASA's future. "It's reasonable to say the astronaut office should be smaller. How much smaller depends on ... what you want these guys to be doing."

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At most, three shuttle missions remain on the calendar. Two require six-member crews; a third, a potential rescue mission, has a designated crew of four. An additional 11 astronauts are preparing for long-duration stays aboard the International Space Station — and probably will get there aboard Russian Soyuz rockets.

But that still leaves more than half of the 64 current astronauts — nine more are in training — without a mission.

NASA officials said that imbalance was a matter of timing, as there are more than 30 station mission slots available through 2020 that haven't been assigned. But critics say scientists and engineers could fill those slots without going through expensive astronaut training.

And astronauts won't be riding a new rocket beyond low-Earth orbit for years.

Under a plan approved by Congress and the White House, NASA's next spacecraft capable of carrying humans to the International Space Station won't be ready until 2017 at the earliest. At the same time, the agency's manned space plans are in flux. Under the [George W. Bush](#) administration, the target was the moon by 2020. But President Obama has asked NASA to aim for a first-ever trip to an asteroid by 2025.

Astronauts are expensive, said Howard McCurdy, a space policy expert and a professor at American University; keeping them on the government payroll isn't like "maintaining a couple of extra forest rangers."

But, he said, before resizing the astronaut corps, it's important to figure out its role. "The big question is: Where we are going and when?"

NASA officials said the size of the astronaut corps was based on a complicated series of factors that took into account things such as medical concerns, attrition rates and the skills needed for particular missions. The officials point out that the number of astronauts has dropped by more than half since a high-water mark of 149 in 2000.

Set against the rest of NASA's \$18.7-billion budget, spending on the astronaut office is relatively small — in the tens of millions of dollars, though NASA wouldn't say exactly how much. The 47 civilian astronauts earn between \$65,000 and \$101,000 a year; the 17 military astronauts are paid by the [Defense Department](#), which is reimbursed by NASA.

The major cost is for training, including the corps' fleet of T-38 trainer aircraft; a "negative buoyancy" water tank used to train spacewalkers; and other facilities at Johnson Space Center in Houston.

The National Academies investigators have been asked specifically to examine the T-38 fleet. More generally, they also will look into the role and size of the astronaut corps and the facilities used to support them.

The supersonic jets have been used by NASA for decades to prepare astronauts for the rigors of spaceflight. But such training may no longer be needed; NASA wants to launch future astronauts on capsules, which, unlike the winged shuttle, can't be flown once they begin reentry.

But the T-38 has a reputation as an astronaut perk. That was reinforced last year when it was revealed that astronaut [Mark Kelly](#), who is set to command one of the remaining shuttle missions, used some of his T-38 training hours to visit his now-wife Rep. [Gabrielle Giffords](#) (D-Ariz.).

The National Academies study is not the first time the astronaut office has come under scrutiny. In 2003, NASA's inspector general found that "costs for the astronaut program were higher than necessary" and that astronauts were "not all being used in a manner commensurate with their expensive training."

The last line was directed at NASA's often-used defense: that astronauts help with the engineering of spacecraft by providing a user perspective. "We found that some astronauts worked in technical assignments that did not require astronauts and could have been performed by less-expensive engineers," the 2003 investigators wrote.

A key obstacle to cutting the astronaut corps, noted by McCurdy and others, is the immense symbolism tied to a team that once put men on the moon. And NASA tries to maximize that symbolism: Astronauts made 521 public appearances in 2009 — and 517 so far this year, with some involving more than one astronaut, NASA records show.

Rep. Pete Olson, a [Texas](#) Republican who represents Johnson Space Center, said the corps was a "national asset" that provided more than just expertise. "They are the faces of human space exploration," he said.

"There is no budgetary savings that can pay for the loss in stature," Olson said.

But one budget analyst argued that even the astronauts could benefit from a sharp reduction in the corps. Rather than work for the government, ex-astronauts could find jobs with the commercial rocket companies that are working to provide a U.S. alternative to Russian flights to the space station.

"These people obviously possess unique skills," said Tad DeHaven of the [Cato](#) Institute. "There could be tremendous opportunity for them under private manned spaceflight."

Concerns about NASA's future, however, have not diminished the appeal of being an astronaut. More than 3,500 hopefuls applied for the 2009 class; the nine remaining members, expected to finish training next year, include a flight surgeon and a [CIA](#) officer.

It's a time-honored NASA tradition to give every new astronaut class a derogatory nickname, chosen by the class that preceded it. This group is "The Chumps" — fitting for the first class in a generation without a U.S. spacecraft to fly.

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