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Government Shutdown Won't Ground NASA's Biomedical Research

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- Research on aging in space will continue in face of government shutdown
- Previous plan from NASA would furlough 90 percent of workforce

The International Space Station is floating 254 miles above the Earth's surface, and that may be far enough to protect the scientific research it's conducting from a government shutdown.

The research on aging in space is one of a number of biomedical studies being conducted through a partnership between the National Institutes of Health and NASA. NASA and NIH officials said the research is likely to continue even if there is a government shutdown at the end of the week.

The project is one of a few that the National Aeronautics and Space Administration would likely continue if a shutdown occurs. The agency's shutdown plan for 2017, for example, would have furloughed 90 percent of its workforce.

The NIH-NASA partnership, which began in 2007, allows scientists to study human diseases, including the molecular basis for aging, in a gravity-free environment.

The aging study uses a set of tissue chips to look at the relationship between aging and immune responses. Researchers hope it will yield clues to slowing aging. Tissue chips are miniature models of living organ tissues on a transparent microchip.

"The Tissue Chips in Space program will continue, even in the event of a partial government shutdown since NIH as part of HHS will remain open and the projects are already fully awarded by NIH for this fiscal year," Danilo Tagle, acting deputy director and associate director for special initiatives at the National Center for Advancing Translational Sciences, part of the NIH, said in a statement to Bloomberg Law.

"NASA still is evaluating how it would be affected by a lapse of government funding after Dec. 21," NASA spokesperson Stephanie Schierholz said in a statement.

"In previous shutdowns, we have maintained personnel to support the International Space Station and its crew, and currently operating space missions, such as satellites, landers, and rovers, to ensure they're safe and secure," she said.

"We anticipate the crew would continue to work on science and research that has already been scheduled for them," Schierholz said.

Researchers in the partnership are also studying the basis of bone and muscle deterioration—which can be caused by prolonged periods of weightlessness—to help people with fragile bones or who suffer from muscle-wasting diseases on Earth.

"We expect this research to give scientists new insights into the molecular basis for many human conditions, which … may lead to the development of novel therapies here on Earth," Tagle said in a statement earlier this month.

Meanwhile, the HHS also is planning to partner with NASA.

The department signed an interagency agreement in early December that covers the entire agency, including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Food and Drug Administration.

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