

September 8 – Russian “Explanation” of Progress Launch Failure Explains Nothing

1. The Russian space accident commission investigating the crash of their robot supply ship two weeks ago has announced their conclusion -- 'litter' partially clogging a fuel line to a component in the 3rd stage engine.
2. No evidence for this conclusion was described, except for the measured pressure drop. No debris was ever recovered. Other engines of the same batch were examined but no results were described.
3. Such a 'foreign object' contamination is plausible and has occurred in other rockets around the world. But it sounds to me like a supposition, not proven.
4. Moreover, the source of the alleged contamination -- leftover from fabrication, or introduced in shipping or during fuelling at the launch site -- was not specified.
5. So it's more of a miraculous 'cause' that explains nothing, like the legendary death certificate that said a man died "because his heart stopped". DUH!
6. Whatever the actual cause turns out to be, the bigger picture remains NOT addressed -- it's even denied. That is the dropping capabilities of the aging, dying-off Russian space operations workers. It is an industry-wide demographic dilemma.
7. New employees are in short supply because of low pay and prestige. This problem has been described in more and more apocalyptic terms in the Russian press in recent years.
8. The recent spate of space disasters caused by simply STUPID human errors indicates these warnings are justified.
9. Even the head of the Russian space reliability/quality oversight team, Gennadiy Raykunov, warned the government during a little-publicized testimony to the Duma two years ago.
10. "The organizational and methodological management of quality and reliability services at rocket-and-space industry enterprises has broken down." told them. "The services are in decline."
11. Raykunov went on: The space agency's experimental base is "morally and physically outdated."
12. Raykunov added: "The number of failures during flight testing and use of rocket-and-space hardware has increased substantially.... The majority of failures are associated with insufficient work on the ground, unjustified substitution of real testing with calculations."
13. Many of these failures are discovered by NASA only YEARS afterwards, if at all. The Russians just don't share the information with people whose lives depend on the reliability of their hardware.
14. THAT'S the growing threat to Russian space capabilities, and to our reliance on them -- and to American lives. THAT'S the crisis that remains to be addressed directly, much less solved.
15. The amended schedule of launches for the space station can now proceed, but any new problem anywhere in the Russian space program could occur and threaten the plans all over again.