

NASA aims for March 12 space shuttle launch

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NASA is aiming to launch the space shuttle Discovery next month after repeated delays caused by critical valves. Shuttle managers said Wednesday they hope to launch on March 12, a full month after the original launch date of Feb. 12.

NASA's Space Shuttle Program has established a plan that could support shuttle Discovery's launch to the International Space Station, tentatively targeted for March 12. An exact target launch date will be determined as work progresses with the shuttle's three gaseous hydrogen flow control valves.

At the Kennedy Space Center in Florida, technicians have started removing Discovery's three valves, two of which will undergo detailed inspection. Approximately 4,000 images of each valve will be reviewed for evidence of cracks. Valves that have flown fewer times will be installed in Discovery. Engineering teams also will complete analysis and testing to understand the consequences if a valve piece were to break off and strike pressurization lines between the shuttle and external fuel tank. Hardware modifications may be made to the pressurization lines to add extra protection in the unlikely event debris is released.

NASA and contractor teams have been working to identify what caused damage to a flow control valve on shuttle Endeavour during its November 2008 flight. Part of the main propulsion system, the valves channel gaseous hydrogen from the main engines to the external tank. After a thorough review of shuttle Discovery's readiness for flight on

Feb. 20, NASA managers decided more understanding of the valve work was required before launching Discovery.

The Space Shuttle Program will hold a meeting March 4 to review new data and assess ongoing work. Managers then will determine whether to move forward with a flight readiness review March 6.

Provided by NASA

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