

NASA catapults new Orion capsule into NM desert

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The new Orion crew capsule is catapulted into the air on Thursday, May 6, 2010 at White Sands Missile Range, N.M., during a test of Orion's launch-abort system, which will whisk astronauts and the capsule to safety in case of a problem on the launch pad, such as a fire, or during the climb to orbit. The Orion capsule was originally designed to take astronauts back to the moon. But President Obama in February killed NASA's \$100 billion plans to return to the moon, redirecting the money for new rocket technology research. (AP Photo/Craig Fritz)

(AP) -- NASA engineers catapulted the new Orion crew capsule about a mile into the air Thursday morning as hundreds of people gathered to watch.

The launch at White Sands Missile Range in the barren southern New Mexico desert left a stream of white smoke as the unmanned capsule arched through the sky, deployed a parachute and landed about a mile

north of the launch site.

The tests are aimed at Orion's launch-abort system, which will whisk astronauts and the capsule to safety in case of a problem on the launch pad, such as a fire, or during the climb to orbit.

Jeff Sheehy, a [NASA](#) engineer working on the capsule, said the test appeared to be successful.

The Orion capsule was originally designed to take astronauts back to the moon. But President [Barack Obama](#) in February killed NASA's \$100 billion plans to return to the moon, redirecting the money for new rocket technology research.

One proposal is to send the capsule to the [International Space Station](#) to be used as an escape vehicle, so U.S. [astronauts](#) wouldn't have to rely on the Russian Soyuz for an emergency flight home.

"It will transition to some useful purpose," Sheehy said. "What that is remains to be seen."

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