

Iridium Next Prepares to Ride the Falcon

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Iridium Next might have launched their last suite of satellites on Deltas, Protons and on the Long March - but the next wave will be all about the Falcon 9. Photo Credit: Alan Walters/awaltersphoto.com

To date, Iridium NEXT is the largest commercial space launch contract with any single entity. All total, the contract is worth an estimated \$492M. Iridium Communications Inc. signed into a deal with Space Explorations Technologies (SpaceX) as its major launch provider of its

communications satellites on SpaceX's Falcon 9 rocket. The manner in which the Iridium NEXT family of satellites is launched will be a dramatic departure from how Iridium launched its first suite of satellites back in the 90s.

Iridium launched this first constellation of [communications satellites](#) within the time span of a single year, from 1997 until 1998. [Iridium](#) sent this constellation into orbit on multiple different launch vehicles. The original deployment was a distinctly international affair, with the U.S. Delta II, the Russian Proton and the Chinese Long March rockets all playing a role in putting the entire fleet of satellites into orbit.

This time, only a single launch provider, SpaceX, and their twice-flown Falcon 9 rocket have been given the nod to accomplish the job. They will also complete the planned 72 [satellite](#) fleet in only eight launches of nine satellites each. Sixty-six of these satellites will be fully operational; the remaining six will be on-orbit spares (in case there is a contingency with any of the operating satellites). Iridium will also have nine additional ground spares.

But Iridium has plans to further maximize the value of these satellites by selling space on them so that other firms can attach sensors or experiments.

“Every one of these satellites has a budget of about 110 pounds that can be used to fly extra payloads from different customers,” said Iridium's CEO Matt Desch during a recent interview. “We will be hosting other people's sensors on our satellites.”

The arrangement between Iridium and the NewSpace firm was just one in a string of successes as far as SpaceX is concerned. With the first two successful flights of the Falcon 9 rocket, the unspoken-but-obvious backing of the White House and the contract with Iridium, SpaceX is on

a winning streak that shows little signs of abating. With the second launch of its Falcon 9 rocket, [SpaceX](#) became the first company to do what only nations had done before – send a spacecraft into orbit and have it return safely to Earth (the Dragon spacecraft splashed down in the Pacific Ocean a few hours after launch).

The contract with Iridium Communications is set to see its first launch during the first quarter of 2015. With the system fully financed (as of this past fall) the company now has to build it on orbit. When the constellation of satellites is on orbit it is expected to be functioning for many years to come.

“It was an innovative system that broke all the rules, and now we’re going to do it again,” said Desch. “A lot of people don’t realize what a powerful system we are today. They probably only remember us from 10-15 years ago. We’re going to remind them of who we are and what we are capable of, the replacement system will last until 2030 and what we will do today will last for years to come.”

Source: [Universe Today](#)

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