

NASA OKs Feb. launch of private space station trip

December 9 2011, By MARCIA DUNN , AP Aerospace Writer



Elon Musk, CEO of Space Exploration Technologies Corp, speaks in April 2011 in Washington, DC. SpaceX will fly its Dragon capsule on an unmanned mission to the International Space Station in February, marking the first-ever bid by a private company to dock at the orbiting lab, NASA said Friday.

A private California company will attempt the first-ever commercial cargo run to the International Space Station in February.

NASA announced the news Friday, one year and one day after Space Exploration Technologies Corp., or SpaceX, became the first private business to launch a capsule into orbit and return it safely to Earth.

On Feb. 7, SpaceX will attempt another [orbital flight](#) from [Cape Canaveral Air Force Station](#). This time, the unmanned Dragon capsule will fly to the space station and dock with a load of supplies.

NASA stressed it is a target date.

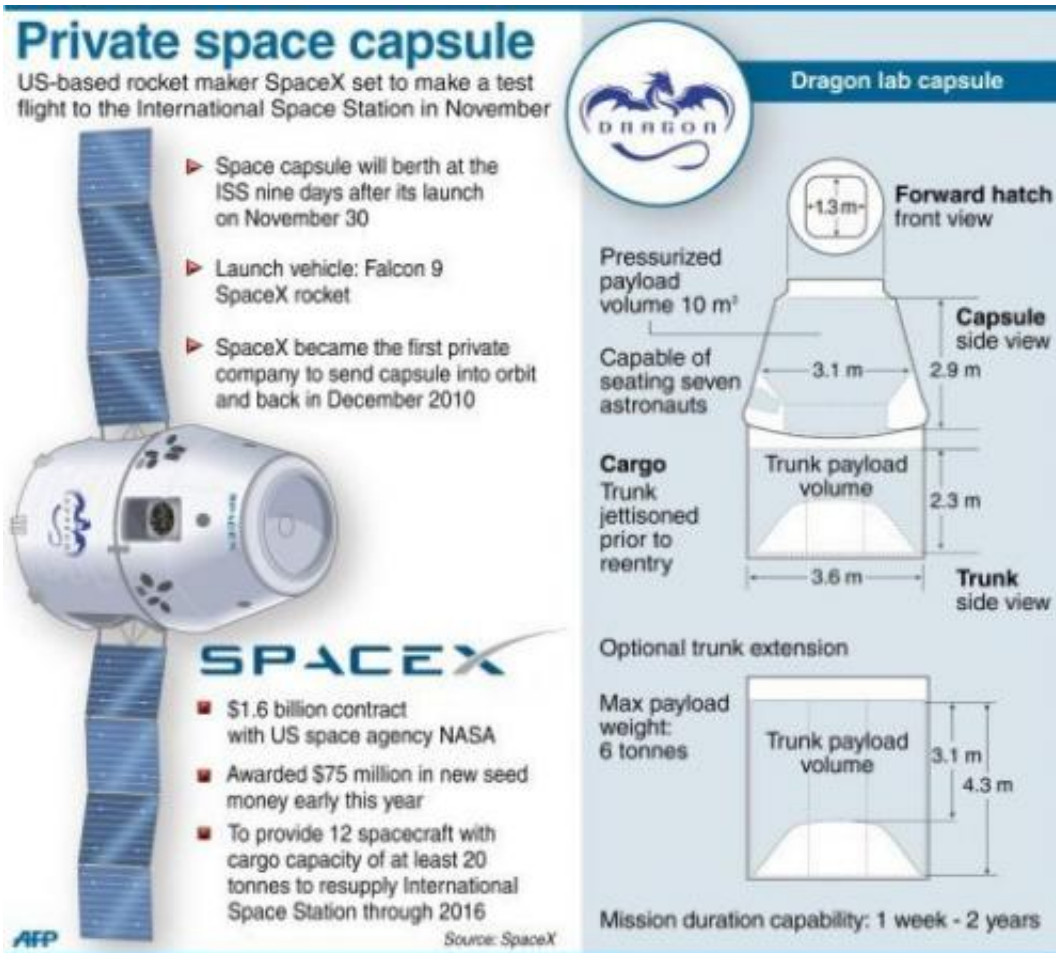
"Pending all the final safety reviews and testing, SpaceX will send its Dragon spacecraft to rendezvous with the [International Space Station](#) in less than two months," said NASA's No. 2, deputy administrator Lori Garver. "So it is the opening of that new commercial cargo delivery era."

NASA has turned to industry to help stock the space station now that the space shuttles are retired, investing hundreds of millions of dollars in this startup effort. The station currently is supplied by Russian, European and Japanese vessels.

SpaceX's Dragon capsule will fly within two miles of the space station, for a checkout of all its systems. Then it will close in, with station astronauts grabbing the capsule with a [robotic arm](#). The Dragon ultimately will be released for a splashdown in the Pacific. None of the other cargo carriers come back intact; they burn up on re-entry.

If the rendezvous and docking fail, SpaceX will try again. That was the original plan: to wait until the third mission to actually hook up with the station and delivery supplies. SpaceX wanted to hurry it up.

None of the supplies on board the Dragon will be one-of-a-kind or crucial, in case of failure.



Graphic on California-based rocket maker SpaceX, which will make a test flight in late November to the International Space Station. The first manned mission by a private company is not expected until around 2015.

SpaceX - run by PayPal co-founder Elon Musk - is one of several companies vying for space station visiting privileges. It hopes to step up to astronaut ferry trips in perhaps three more years. In the meantime, Americans will be forced to continue buying seats on Russian Soyuz spacecraft.

"Every decision that we make at SpaceX is focused on ... taking crew to space," SpaceX President Gwynne Shotwell said Friday at a forum in

Seattle about NASA's future. She said the company is "thrilled" at the prospect of delivering cargo to the space station early next year, and noted that the company is shooting for 2014 with astronauts.

Congress has appropriated \$406 million for the commercial crew effort for 2012, considerably less than NASA's requested \$850 million.

"It is nevertheless a significant step," Garver said at the forum, televised by NASA. She said NASA is evaluating whether it can speed up when U.S. companies "deliver our precious astronauts to and from the space station."

Online:

NASA: <http://www.nasa.gov/cots->

[SpaceX: http://www.spacex.com/](http://www.spacex.com/)

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