

Mini space shuttle skids off runway in test flight

October 29 2013, by Marcia Dunn



This artist's rendering provided by Sierra Nevada Space Systems shows the company's proposed Dream Chaser spacecraft docking with the International Space Station. The new, smaller version of NASA's space shuttle is recuperating from a rough first landing. The Nevada-based company tested a full-scale model at Edwards Air Force Base in California on Saturday, Oct. 26, 2013. A helicopter dropped the unmanned craft from 12,500 feet (3,810 meters) in a first free flight. Everything worked well for the automated Dream Chaser model until the end, when the left landing gear deployed too late and the test vehicle skidded off the runway. (AP Photo/Sierra Nevada Space Systems)

A new, smaller version of NASA's space shuttle is recuperating from a rough first landing.

The Dream Chaser space plane is being designed by Sierra Nevada Corp. It's vying to carry astronauts to and from the International Space Station in four or five more years.

The Nevada-based company tested a full-scale model at Edwards Air Force Base in California on Saturday. A helicopter dropped the unmanned craft from 12,500 feet (3,810 meters) in a first free flight reminiscent of NASA's drop tests of the shuttle prototype Enterprise in the 1970s.

Everything worked well for the automated Dream Chaser model until the end, when the left landing gear deployed too late and the test vehicle skidded off the runway.

Company space systems chief Mark Sirangelo said Tuesday that damage was minor. The left gear was still attached and the tire wasn't even shredded, he said. The crew cabin area was unscathed—astronauts would have been uninjured, he said. The flight computers never stopped working, and nothing critical was damaged.

Sirangelo stressed that the minute-long test flight was a success despite the ending.

He said the mishap is likely due to mechanical failure and an investigation is under way. He said it shouldn't hold up plans for a piloted landing test next year. The landing gear is derived from F-5 fighter planes and not the same type that will be used in space.

The test vehicle will be repaired and may fly again, Sirangelo told reporters during a teleconference.

Sierra Nevada—one of several U.S. companies hoping to carry NASA astronauts into orbit—plans the first orbital flight demo of Dream Chaser in 2016 and the first crewed orbital mission in 2017.

NASA already is relying on private industry to ship cargo to the space station, a vacancy created by the retirement of the space shuttles in 2011. Until American companies provide a safe spaceship for crews, NASA will continue to fly its astronauts on Russian Soyuz capsules—for hefty prices.

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