

Report: Orbital faces risks in resuming space station runs (Update)

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In this Tuesday, Oct. 28, 2014 file photo, an unmanned Orbital Sciences Corp.'s Antares rocket headed for the International Space Station explodes shortly after liftoff at Wallops Flight Facility on Wallops Island, Va. On Thursday, Sept. 17, 2015, NASA's inspector general said that Orbital Sciences Corp. faces significant risks in its effort to recover from the explosion. (AP Photo/Eastern Shore News, Jay Diem)

One of NASA's two commercial suppliers, Virginia-based Orbital, faces an uphill struggle in resuming deliveries to the International Space

Station, according to a government report issued Thursday.

The space agency's inspector general office said the company's upcoming flight plan contains significant risks, as its attempts to recover from last October's launch explosion. Orbital's Antares rocket failed seconds after liftoff from Virginia, destroying the space station goods and damaging the launch complex. It was Orbital's fourth supply mission, including a 2013 test flight.

Orbital remains grounded, as does SpaceX, NASA's other commercial shipper, following a failed launch from Cape Canaveral in June. It was the California-based SpaceX's eighth shipment for NASA. Russia and Japan also send up supplies.

Orbital is working to get cargo to the space station as early as December by putting it on another company's rocket in Cape Canaveral. At the same time, Orbital—which merged with ATK earlier this year—hopes to resume Antares flights from Virginia next year with new engines.

According to the report, it may be difficult to meet those goals. But Orbital spokesman Barron Beneski said the company is right on schedule for the launches. The company is confident of its path forward, he said, and working with NASA to fulfill its contract.



In this Tuesday, Oct. 28, 2014 file photo, an unmanned Orbital Sciences Corp.'s Antares rocket headed for the International Space Station lifts off from the Wallops Flight Facility on Wallops Island, Va. shortly before exploding. On Thursday, Sept. 17, 2015, NASA's inspector general said that Orbital Sciences Corp. faces significant risks in its effort to recover from the explosion. (AP Photo/Eastern Shore News, Jay Diem)

The report voiced concern about the fact that Orbital's Cygnus capsule has never flown before on United Launch Alliance's Atlas V rocket, the kind that will be used in December and again in March to launch space station supplies. In addition, the report noted the tight schedule for outfitting the Antares with new engines; the company hopes to resume Antares launches in mid-2016.

Both the old engines—believed to be the source of the accident—and new engines for the Antares are Russian made.

Beneski pointed out that Orbital has deep experience in putting its satellites on a variety of rockets. "Not like we haven't done it before. We have," he told The Associated Press.

NASA's original \$1.9 billion contract with what was then Orbital Sciences Corp. called for eight supply runs. Because of the accident, only seven will be carried out. But the same amount of cargo will be delivered, Beneski said, because of the expanded room on the Cygnus and the heavier lift capabilities of the Atlas and upgraded Antares rockets.

Inspector General Paul Martin said in the 46-page report that NASA did not take advantage of contract provisions to reduce its costs of up to \$84 million. Also, NASA had to pay \$5 million to help fund repairs of damaged property at the Wallops Island launch site, according to the report.

"NASA missed opportunities to seek lower prices from Orbital ... and we question the value" of NASA's agreement to accept one less resupply mission under the contract, the report stated.

The report also criticized Orbital's investigation into the October accident, saying it lacked the independence typically required of NASA mishap boards.

NASA's associate administrator for human exploration and operations, William Gerstenmaier, concurred with six of the inspector general's seven findings. The lone standout was one involving insurance at Wallops; Gerstenmaier said the correct procedures were followed.

More information: NASA: oig.nasa.gov/

Orbital Sciences: www.orbitalatk.com/

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