

Space station cargo launching by light of nearly full moon (Update)

March 22 2016, by Marcia Dunn



The United Launch Alliance Atlas V rocket and Orbital ATK Cygnus spacecraft stack sits on the launch pad at Cape Canaveral Air Force Station in Cape Canaveral, Fla., Monday, March 21, 2016. The cargo carrier is scheduled to launch Tuesday, March 22, and holds a commercial-quality 3D printer for astronaut as well as public use, for a price. (Ben Smegelsky/NASA via AP)

Fresh supplies are due to ship out late Tuesday for the International Space Station, where the shelves finally are getting full after a string of

failed deliveries.

An unmanned Atlas V rocket is scheduled to blast off at 11:05 p.m. by the light of a nearly full moon. The launch may be visible along the entire East Coast. Ideal weather is forecast.

Orbital ATK's Cygnus capsule holds nearly 8,000 pounds of food, equipment and scientific research for NASA, including a commercial-quality 3-D printer anyone can rent and experimental robotic grippers modeled after the thousands of sticky hairs on geckos' feet.

There's also a fire experiment that will remain on the Cygnus. Researchers will ignite a large-scale blaze, in a contained box, to see how it spreads in weightlessness. The fire will not be set until the Cygnus departs the space station in May, full of trash for a destructive re-entry.

Named after the swan constellation, the Cygnus is one of two commercial vehicles used to stock the station. Both haulers have lost shipments to rocket failures over the past 1 ½ years and are still working to catch up. A Russian shipment also ended up destroyed.

Orbital ATK has been using another company's Atlas rockets to keep the station supplies flowing in the wake of its October 2014 launch explosion at Wallops Island, Virginia. This is the second Cygnus assigned to an Atlas; the first flew in December. The company hopes to resume supply runs from Wallops this summer with its own Antares rockets.

SpaceX, meanwhile, is aiming for an April 8 launch of its Dragon cargo carrier; the last one was destroyed in a June launch accident. It will be the first time both a Cygnus and Dragon are at the orbiting outpost at the same time.

Orbital ATK has named this capsule after the late Rick Husband, commander of the doomed space shuttle Columbia. He piloted the first shuttle docking at the International Space Station, back in 1999.

NASA contracted out space station cargo deliveries—and beginning as early as next year, crew taxi flights—to concentrate on getting humans to Mars in the 2030s. Earlier this month, U.S. astronaut Scott Kelly returned from a yearlong stay at the space station, helping to push that goal forward.

More information: NASA:

www.nasa.gov/mission_pages/station/main/index.html

Orbital ATK: www.orbitalatk.com/

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