

NASA begs spectators for astronaut launch: Please stay home!

May 1 2020, by Marcia Dunn



In this image from video made available by NASA, astronauts Bob Behnken, left, and Doug Hurley give a news conference at the Johnson Space Center in Houston on Friday, May 1, 2020. The two are scheduled for a May 27 launch aboard a SpaceX rocket to the International Space Station. (NASA via AP)

NASA and SpaceX on Friday urged spectators to stay home for the first home launch of astronauts in nearly a decade because of the coronavirus pandemic.

Top officials warned the public against traveling to Florida for the May 27 launch of two NASA astronauts aboard a SpaceX rocket to the International Space Station.

It will be the first launch of astronauts from NASA's Kennedy Space Center in nine years—ever since the last space shuttle flight in 2011. It also will be the first attempt by a private company to fly astronauts to orbit.

For space shuttle launches, hundreds of thousands of spectators would descend on Kennedy Space Center and nearby beaches, said NASA Administrator Jim Bridenstine.

"The challenge that we're up against right now is we want to keep everybody safe," he said. "And so we're asking people not to travel to the Kennedy Space Center, and I will tell you that makes me sad to even say it. Boy, I wish we could make this into something really spectacular."

Bridenstine urged the public to watch the launch online or on TV from home.

"We don't want an outbreak," of COVID-19, he told reporters during a remote news conference.

SpaceX President Gwynne Shotwell agreed it's a shame more people won't be able to enjoy the launch from Florida. But she encouraged people to "be there for the ride with us."



In this July 8, 2011 file photo, spectators watch the space shuttle Atlantis lift off from the Kennedy Space Center at Cape Canaveral, Fla. Atlantis was the 135th and final space shuttle launch for NASA. On Friday, May 1, 2020, NASA and SpaceX urged everyone to stay home for the first home launch of astronauts in nearly a decade, coming up later in the month, because of the coronavirus pandemic. (AP Photo/Phil Sandlin)

"We'll be together in spirit more so than in physical space," she said.

Local officials are still mulling whether to allow people on beaches, parks and roadways on launch day.

NASA and SpaceX already are limiting the number of employees near astronauts Doug Hurley and Bob Behnken. Anyone coming close must

wear masks and gloves, and their temperatures are checked. The astronauts also are staying away from all but the most important training events.

Hurley said the two are disappointed their families and friends will have to miss the launch in person, but "Obviously, it's the right thing to do in the current environment." Both astronauts said they have already been in quarantine for weeks along with their wives and young sons, so those few family members can join them at Kennedy for the launch.

The pair will go into full quarantine two weeks before liftoff, first at Johnson Space Center in Houston and then at Kennedy.

In both the NASA and SpaceX flight control rooms, staff will be spaced at least 6 feet (2 meters) apart on launch day and throughout the mission, and plenty of hand sanitizer, masks and gloves will be available.

NASA turned to private companies in the wake of the space shuttle program to get cargo to the space station. Next up are the crew deliveries. Russian Soyuz capsules, meanwhile, have been the sole means of crew transportation to the orbiting lab.

Boeing also is working to launch astronauts under NASA's commercial crew program; its first crew flight is still months—if not a year—away.

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