

SpaceX on cusp of launching astronauts, back on home turf

May 27 2020, by Marcia Dunn



NASA astronauts Douglas Hurley, left, and Robert Behnken walk outside the Neil A. Armstrong Operations and Checkout Building, at the Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Fla., Wednesday, May 27, 2020. The two astronauts will fly on a SpaceX test flight to the International Space Station. For the first time in nearly a decade, astronauts will blast into orbit aboard an American rocket from American soil, a first for a private company. (AP Photo/John Raoux)

With bad weather threatening a delay, two NASA astronauts suited up for the launch of a SpaceX rocket ship Wednesday on a history-making flight to the International Space Station that was seen as a giant leap forward for the booming business of commercial space travel.

Space veterans Doug Hurley and Bob Behnken were scheduled to ride into orbit aboard the brand-new Dragon capsule on top of a Falcon 9 rocket, lifting off at 4:33 p.m. EDT from the same launch pad used by the Apollo moon missions a half-century ago.

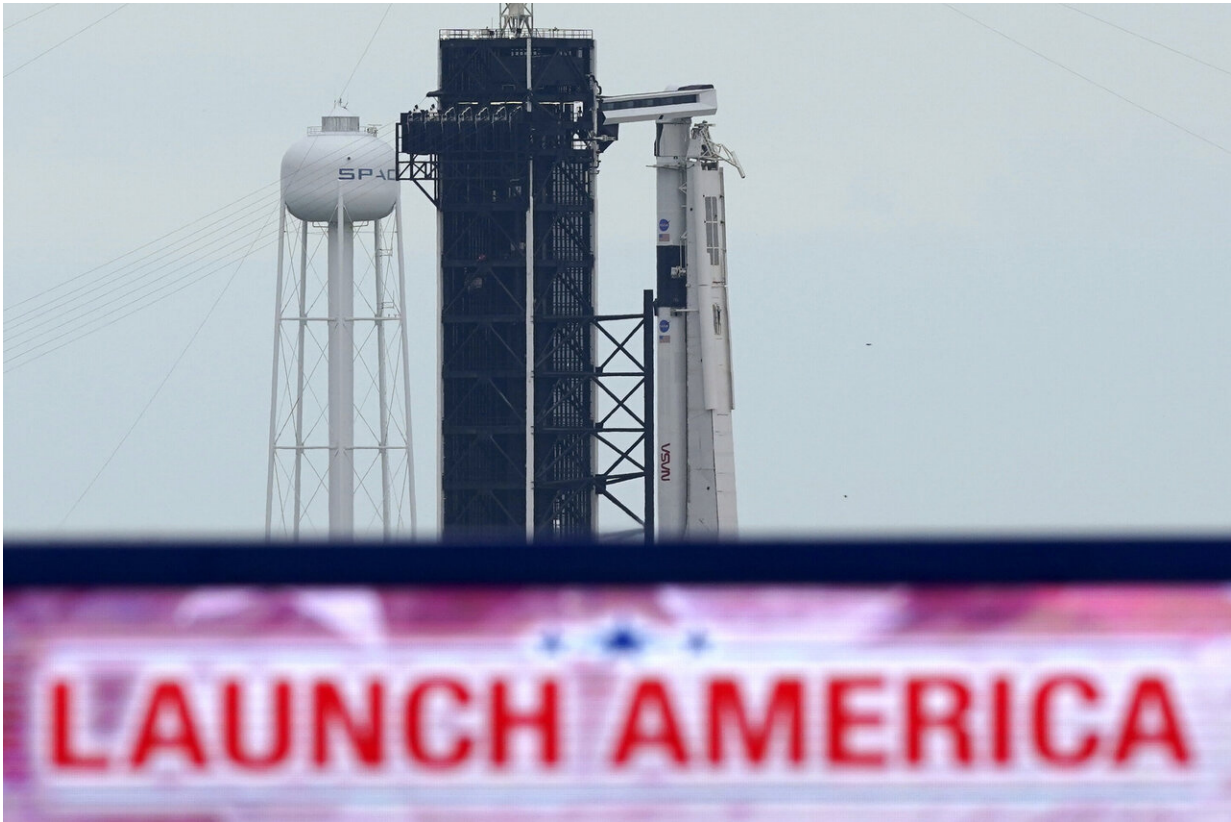
The flight would mark the first time a private company sent humans into orbit. It would also be the first time in nearly a decade that the United States launched astronauts into orbit from U.S. soil.

Ever since the space shuttle was retired in 2011, NASA has relied on Russian spaceships launched from Kazakhstan to take U.S. astronauts to and from the space station.

At midday, though, with four hours remaining before liftoff, launch controllers put the chances of acceptable weather for liftoff at just 50-50 because of rain, clouds and thunderstorms at NASA's Kennedy Space Center. A tropical storm farther up the East Coast also complicated matters.

In the event of a postponement, the next launch opportunity would be Saturday.

The preparations took place in the shadow of the coronavirus outbreak that has killed an estimated 100,000 Americans.



The SpaceX Falcon 9, with the Crew Dragon spacecraft on top of the rocket, sits on Launch Pad 39-A, Tuesday, May 26, 2020, at Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Fla. Two astronauts will fly on the SpaceX Demo-2 mission to the International Space Station scheduled for launch on May 27. (AP Photo/David J. Phillip)

"We're launching American astronauts on American rockets from American soil. We haven't done this really since 2011, so this is a unique moment in time," NASA Administrator Jim Bridenstine said.

With this launch, he said, "everybody can look up and say, 'Look, the future is so much brighter than the present.' And I really hope that this is an inspiration to the world."

The mission would put Elon Musk's SpaceX in the same league as only three countries—Russia, the U.S. and China, which sent astronauts into orbit in that order.

Musk, wearing a mask and keeping his distance, chatted with the astronauts just before they were about to leave for the launch pad in a gull-winged Tesla Model X SUV, built by another Musk business, the Tesla electric car company.

NASA pushed ahead with the launch despite the viral outbreak but asked spectators to stay at home to lower the risk of spreading the virus. Beaches and parks along Florida's Space Coast are open again, and local officials and businesses put out a socially distanced welcome mat. Signs along the main beach drag wished "Godspeed SpaceX."



Spectators wait in a Titusville, Fla. park for the launch of SpaceX Falcon 9 with NASA astronauts Doug Hurley and Bob Behnken in the Dragon crew capsule, Wednesday, May 27, 2020 from the Kennedy Space Center at Cape Canaveral, Fla. The two astronauts will travel on the SpaceX test flight to the International Space Station. For the first time in nearly a decade, astronauts will travel to space aboard an American rocket from American soil, a first for a private company. (AP Photo/Charlie Riedel)

Hours before the launch, cars and RVs already were lining the causeway in Cape Canaveral, with prime views of the pad.

President Donald Trump and Vice President Mike Pence planned to fly into Kennedy, where the guest list was exceedingly limited because of the pandemic.

Among the sightseers was Erin Gatz, who came prepared for both rain and pandemic. Accompanied by her 14-year-old daughter and 12-year-old son, she brought face masks and a small tent to protect against the elements.

She said the children had faint memories of watching in person one of the last shuttle launches almost a decade ago when they were preschoolers.

"I wanted them to see the flip side and get to see the next era of space travel," said Gatz, who lives in Deltona, Florida. "It's exciting and hopeful."

Hurley, 53, and Behnken, 49, are both two-time shuttle fliers.



The SpaceX Falcon 9, with the Crew Dragon spacecraft on top of the rocket, sits on Launch Pad 39-A Wednesday, May 27, 2020, at Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Fla. Two astronauts will fly on the SpaceX Demo-2 mission to the International Space Station scheduled for launch Wednesday afternoon. (Joel Kowsky/NASA via AP)



NASA astronauts Douglas Hurley, left, and Robert Behnken smile outside the Neil A. Armstrong Operations and Checkout Building, at the Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Fla., Wednesday, May 27, 2020. The two astronauts will fly on a SpaceX test flight to the International Space Station. For the first time in nearly a decade, astronauts will blast into orbit aboard an American rocket from American soil, a first for a private company. (AP Photo/John Raoux)



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The SpaceX Falcon 9, with the Crew Dragon spacecraft on top of the rocket, sits on Launch Pad 39-A Monday, May 25, 2020, at Kennedy Space Center, Fla. Two astronauts will fly on the SpaceX Demo-2 mission to the International Space Station scheduled for launch on May 27. (AP Photo/David J. Phillip)



The SpaceX Falcon 9, with the Crew Dragon spacecraft on top of the rocket, sits

on Launch Pad 39-A Monday, May 25, 2020, at Kennedy Space Center, Fla. Two astronauts will fly on the SpaceX Demo-2 mission to the International Space Station scheduled for launch on May 27. (AP Photo/David J. Phillip)



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NASA hired SpaceX and Boeing in 2014 to transport astronauts to the space station in a new kind of public-private partnership.. Development of SpaceX's Dragon and Boeing's Starliner capsules took longer than expected, however. Boeing's craft is not expected to fly astronauts into space until early 2021.

"We're doing it differently than we've ever done it before," Bridenstine said. "We're transforming how we do spaceflight in the future."

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