

NASA adds third company as space station shipper; shuttle back (Update)

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In this June 27, 2013 photo provided by NASA, Sierra Nevada Corp. engineers and technicians prepare the Dream Chaser engineering test vehicle for tow tests at NASA's Dryden Flight Research Center in California. On Thursday, Jan. 14, 2016, NASA announced the Sierra Nevada Corp. will join SpaceX and Orbital ATK in launching cargo to the International Space Station. These flights, yet to be finalized, will run through 2024. (Ken Ulbrich/NASA via AP)

NASA is adding a third company to its short list of space station suppliers, a Nevada business that will bring back a mini version of the shuttle.

On Thursday, NASA announced Sierra Nevada Corp. will join SpaceX and Orbital ATK in launching cargo to the International Space Station. These flights will begin in 2019 and run through 2024.

This marks a second chance for Sierra Nevada. It competed for NASA's commercial crew contract, but lost out in 2014 to SpaceX and Boeing in a bid to ferry astronauts.

The Sparks, Nevada-based company is developing a scaled-down shuttle called Dream Chaser to haul cargo. The other companies use standard-shaped capsules.

Like SpaceX, Sierra Nevada plans to launch from Cape Canaveral, Florida. The spacecraft will be able to land back on Earth, like the shuttle, and bring back science experiments and other items from the station.

"Within a few short years, the world will once again see a United States winged vehicle launch and return from space to a runway landing," Mark Sirangelo, vice president of Sierra Nevada's space systems, said in a statement.

NASA's space station program manager, Kirk Shireman, said he's been assured that the Dream Chaser could touch down on lots of runways—in lots of places. The goal is to retrieve science samples, though, as quickly as possible for analysis. A runway touchdown would be gentler than the ocean parachute drop used by SpaceX.



In this Aug. 22, 2013 photo provided by NASA, Sierra Nevada Corporation's Dream Chaser engineering test spacecraft is suspended from a cable from a large helicopter during a test at the NASA Dryden site in California. On Thursday, Jan. 14, 2016, Nasa announced the Sierra Nevada Corp. will join SpaceX and Orbital ATK in launching cargo to the International Space Station. These flights, yet to be finalized, will run through 2024. (Carla Thomas/NASA via AP)

"The air traffic controllers would hate us landing" at Washington Dulles International or other major airports, Shireman said. "Most likely, we'll land in Florida, right close to where our facilities are."

Now, only SpaceX can return goods. In its latest proposal, SpaceX has offered to return its Dragon capsules to land as well, Shireman said. Other cargo ships, including Orbital's Cygnus and Russia's Progress, are filled with trash and burn up on re-entry.

Recent launch accidents by SpaceX and Orbital prompted NASA to pick

a third vendor, for increased flexibility.

Orbital launched from Wallops Island, Virginia, until a launch explosion in 2014. It's using another company's rocket, the Atlas V in Cape Canaveral, until its own Antares rocket is ready to fly later this year from Wallops. SpaceX experienced its own launch failure last summer; it hopes to resume supply runs for NASA in the next month or so.

NASA awarded its first commercial resupply contracts in 2008, anticipating the pending retirement of its space shuttles. The first commercial cargo flight, by SpaceX, was in 2012, a year after the last shuttle mission. The latest contract calls for a minimum of six flights by each of the three companies.

Shireman anticipates four commercial supply runs a year, once flights kick in under the new contracts.

The original contracts exceeded \$3 billion. Shireman declined to put a cost on this second round, noting it would come nowhere near the \$14 billion maximum value cited in the procurement papers.

Many details, in fact, will have to wait, Shireman stressed. He would not comment on Boeing's departure from the competition last year, or other contenders.

The Dream Chaser program—underway for 10 years—is based in Louisville, Colorado.

More information: NASA: www.nasa.gov/offices/c3po/home/

Sierra Nevada: www.sncspace.com/

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