

SpaceX's next launch to mark start of new era

22 April 2017, by Marco Santana, Orlando Sentinel



An upcoming launch of a government spy satellite for the National Reconnaissance Office will mark the first time the U.S. Department of Defense has used SpaceX for a mission.

For at least the last six years, that arena has been the exclusive domain of competitor United Launch Alliance, which also launches regularly from Florida.

The [satellite](#) is scheduled to launch on a SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket no earlier than April 30.

The NRO revealed in May that it had awarded SpaceX the upcoming launch.

The mission will reflect a new area of competition for SpaceX and ULA, two of the main launch providers from the Space Coast. That could mean more business for Florida.

"This satellite was going to launch from Florida anyway," said Dale Ketcham, Space Florida's chief of strategic alliances. "But it reflects more competition. That will drive down prices and could result in it being cheaper to get into space, meaning more launches. Competition is a good thing."

SpaceX until now has focused primarily on telecommunications satellites and cargo missions

for the International Space Station.

But landing the government deal did not come without a testy exchange and threat of legal action.

Musk had planned to sue the Air Force, which he accused of rewarding United Launch Alliance because some there planned the company as "their future retirement program."

"Essentially we're asking them to award a contract to a company where they are probably not going to get a job, against a company where their friends are," he told Bloomberg Business Week in early 2015.

Shortly thereafter, the Air Force opened bidding to the Hawthorne, Calif.-based company.

Ultimately, it represented a win for the government, space historian Roger Launius said.

"From the government angle, they now have more than one launch provider," said Launius, formerly of the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C. "That's important because if you lose one and have to stand down for whatever period of time, especially for national security payloads, you still have options."

When the National Reconnaissance Office revealed SpaceX as its provider for the [satellite launch](#), industry observers saw the move as a big moment because it essentially opened the door to competitive bidding on national security contracts.

SpaceX landed a deal in March to send a GPS navigation satellite for the Air Force into space for \$96.5 million. That launch is expected to take place within the next two years.

In the competitive space, Launius said SpaceX's advantage comes at the top.

"At this point, I'm not willing to bet against Elon and his people," he said. "They have proven over and over that they can pull this stuff off."

SpaceX's successful relaunch March 30 of a used Falcon 9 rocket marked another first for Musk's company, carrying a telecommunications satellite toward orbit before landing the booster on a barge at sea. That accomplishment is early proof that the company's plan to reuse boosters could eventually lower launch costs.

Few details are available about the upcoming NRO launch, scheduled for as early as April 30 according to a launch-tracking website. The NRO generally keeps those details under wraps.

SpaceX has not confirmed the [launch date](#).

ULA and SpaceX have ramped up their manifests this year, with ULA launching a cargo resupply mission to International Space Station on Tuesday. Spokespeople for SpaceX and United Launch Alliance did not respond to emails requesting comment.

"This is their way of (SpaceX) breaking into the game of government and defense launches," said Justin Karl, program coordinator of Commercial Space Operations at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University.

He said SpaceX's capabilities could grow quickly from the NRO contract.

"It's a very big deal," he said. "For government orbital launches, there are very few flight provider options. That is a huge segment of a changing market they have potentially captured."

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