

Bezos's Blue Origin poised for first orbital launch next week

AFP- Named New Glenn, the rocket is scheduled to lift off from Cape Canaveral Space Force Station in Florida as soon as Wednesday 1:00 am (0600 GMT), with a backup window on Friday, according to a Federal Aviation Administration advisory.

While Blue Origin has not officially confirmed the launch date, excitement has been building since a successful "hotfire" test on December 27.

"Next stop launch," Bezos declared on X, sharing a video of the towering rocket's engines roaring to life.

The NG-1 mission will carry a prototype of Blue Ring, a Defense Department-funded spacecraft envisioned as a versatile satellite deployment platform, which will remain on board the rocket's second stage for the duration of the six-hour test flight.

It will mark Blue Origin's long-awaited entry into the lucrative orbital launch market after years of suborbital flights with its smaller New Shepard rocket, which carries passengers and payloads on brief trips to the edge of space.

"The market is really orbital," analyst Laura Forczyk, founder of Astralytical, told AFP. "Suborbital can only take you so far – there are only so many payloads and customers for a quick ride to space."

– Space barons –

The milestone will also escalate the rivalry between Bezos, the world's second-richest person, and Musk, the wealthiest, who has cemented SpaceX's dominance and is now in President-elect Donald Trump's inner circle.

SpaceX's Falcon 9 rockets have become industry workhorses, serving clients from commercial satellite operators to the Pentagon and NASA, which relies on them to ferry astronauts to and from the International Space Station.

Like Falcon 9, New Glenn features a reusable first stage designed to land vertically on a ship at sea.

The vessel, playfully named "So You're Telling Me There's a Chance," reflects the challenge of landing a reusable rocket on the first attempt, Blue Origin CEO Dave Limp said on X.

At 320 feet (98 meters), New Glenn dwarfs the 230-foot Falcon 9 and is designed to carry larger, heavier payloads. It slots between Falcon 9 and its larger sibling, Falcon Heavy, in cargo capacity while burning cleaner liquid natural gas rather than kerosene and relying on fewer engines.

"If I were still a senior executive at NASA, I'd be thrilled to finally have some competition to the Falcon 9," G. Scott Hubbard, NASA's former "Mars Czar" now at Stanford University, told AFP, adding that increased competition could help drive down launch costs.

– Politics at play –

For now, SpaceX maintains a commanding lead, capturing the lion's share of the market while rivals like United Launch Alliance, Arianespace and Rocket Lab trail far behind.

Like Musk, Bezos has an enduring passion for space. But where Musk dreams of colonizing Mars, Bezos envisages populating the solar system with massive floating space colonies.

Bezos founded Blue Origin in 2000 – two years before Musk started SpaceX – but the company has progressed at a far slower pace, reflecting a more cautious approach.

"There's been impatience within the space community over Blue Origin's very deliberate approach," Scott Pace, a space policy

analyst at George Washington University and a former member of the National Space Council, told AFP.

If successful, New Glenn will offer the US government “dissimilar redundancy” – alternative systems that provide backups if one fails, said Pace.

This could prove vital as SpaceX plans to retire Falcon 9 by the end of the decade in favor of Starship, a prototype that relies on not fully proven technologies.

Musk’s closeness to Trump has raised concerns about potential conflicts of interest, especially with private astronaut Jared Isaacman – a business associate of Musk – slated to become the next NASA chief.

Bezos, however, has been making his own overtures, paying his respects to his former foe during a visit to the president-elect’s Mar-a-Lago residence, while Amazon has said it would donate \$1 million to Trump’s inauguration committee.

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