

Virgin Orbit moves closer to first launch

by Jeff Foust — September 24, 2019



The LauncherOne that Virgin Orbit will use for its first orbital launch attempt is now in Mojave, California, for final tests before a launch attempt later this fall. Credit: Virgin Orbit

WASHINGTON — Virgin Orbit has shipped the LauncherOne rocket for its inaugural mission from the factory, setting up a launch attempt some time this fall.

The company announced Sept. 24 that it transported the LauncherOne rocket for its first orbital flight from the company's factory in Long Beach, California, to the Mojave Air and Space Port in California.

The air-launched rocket will eventually be mated to the company's modified Boeing 747 aircraft, first for a captive-carry test flight and then for the first orbital launch attempt for the vehicle. Prior to the test, the company said it will put the vehicle on a new test stand in Mojave for "a number of critical exercises," such as fueling the vehicle.

"The main takeaway from these final few exercises is verification of our integrated launch and flight systems," the company said in its statement. "We are prepping and practicing, making sure we know how to do everything we could conceivably ever need to do."

Virgin Orbit didn't give a schedule for completing those tests and performing that orbital flight. Dan Hart, president and chief executive of Virgin Orbit, said at the World Satellite Business Week conference in Paris Sept. 11 that he expected those final tests be completed in a matter of weeks.

"It will take a handful of weeks to get through a number of wet dress rehearsals, crew training, and verification of the system," he said. "We'll do one flight test with that rocket and then we'll get to orbit." He estimated the company would be ready for launch "in the middle of this fall."

Richard Branson, founder of the Virgin Group, offered a similar schedule in an on-stage interview Sept. 16 at the Air Force Association's Air, Space and Cyber Symposium in National Harbor, Maryland, an event where **the company emphasized the role it can play in responsive space launch.**

"In about six weeks, eight weeks, we will be firing the engines on the next drop test and heading at eighteen and a half thousand miles per hour around the Earth in orbit, beginning to drop off satellites," he said.

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