

Elon Musk Pretends To Be All Crunchy Granola Johnny Appleseed But Spies On The World With Spy Satellites That Can Read Your Newspaper From Space

SpaceX to Launch Secret Spy Craft Mission

By
Dana Hull

- Mission is first time Falcon 9 will carry U.S.'s X-37B vehicle
- Air Force base says Irma is forecast to be 900 miles away



QuickTake: Evolution of the Space Race

The forecast for the next mission by Elon Musk's rocket company SpaceX is cloudy -- and not just because of the weather.

[Space Exploration Technologies Corp.](#) is slated for its 13th Falcon 9 launch of the year Thursday, from NASA's Kennedy Space Center in Florida. The mission is shrouded in at least two mysteries: the purpose of the payload it's carrying for the U.S. military, and its chances of going off without a hitch amid a weather system ahead of Hurricane Irma.

A day after pummeling Puerto Rico and the Caribbean, Irma is forecast to be about 900 miles southeast of the launch site during Thursday's take-off, according to the nearby [Patrick Air Force Base](#). The base said on its website Wednesday that thick clouds expected from a separate storm are a concern and estimated a 40 percent to 60 percent chance of launch Thursday. There's also a Friday back-up window.

If SpaceX is able to overcome weather issues, the company will for the first time carry a U.S. Air Force space drone that's conducted highly classified missions in orbit for more than a year at a time. This will be the fifth mission for the [X-37B Orbital Test Vehicle](#), an [autonomous spacecraft](#) about 20 percent of the size of the retired Space Shuttle.

Secretive Vehicle

For years, the Air Force has refused to say what the 11,000-pound vehicle built by Boeing Co. does. The most recent X-37B mission ended in May after more than 700 days circling the Earth.

SpaceX's launch Thursday is scheduled to take place between 9:50 am and 2:55 p.m. local time, SpaceX said in a press kit. It'll then attempt to land the first stage of the rocket on land for reuse.

The SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket won U.S. Air Force certification for national security space missions in May 2015, breaking a lock long-held by [United Launch Alliance](#), a joint venture between Boeing and Lockheed Martin Corp. Each of the first four missions for the X-37B involved the Atlas 5, a United Launch Alliance rocket.

An X-37B is only launched once every few years, so the program itself won't have a major financial impact on SpaceX, said Brian Weeden, the director of program planning for the Secure World Foundation, a space policy think tank.

"However, it could help increase the Air Force's comfort level with launching national security payloads on SpaceX in general, which could be a significant source of revenue in the future," Weeden wrote in an email.

Military Contracts

Contracts for military launches include satellites that let troops communicate on battlefields and are estimated to be valued at about \$70 billion through 2030. In May, SpaceX launched a rocket carrying [NROL-76](#), a classified payload for the National Reconnaissance Office.

SpaceX plans to fly 20 to 24 missions in 2017 for customers that include the National Aeronautics and Space Administration and commercial satellite operators. The Hawthorne, California-based company has contracts with NASA valued at \$4.2 billion to resupply the International Space Station using an unmanned Dragon spacecraft and to ultimately ferry astronauts there with a version of Dragon that is capable of carrying crews.

Musk, SpaceX's CEO, saw his net worth rise by about \$4 billion after SpaceX's latest [fundraising round](#) valued the company at around \$21 billion. The 46-year-old also runs electric-car maker Tesla Inc.

— *With assistance by Justin Bachman*