Even amidst a pandemic, SpaceX is launching more than ever

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- Falcon 9 leaps off SLC-40 Tuesday with the 3rd GPS-III satellite for the United States Space Force / Air Force.
  Trevor Mahlmann
- This is the first time the United States Space Force logo has graced the SpaceX Falcon 9 payload fairing.
  Trevor Mahlmann
- The gray stripe at the bottom of the second stage is to keep the RP-1 fuel warm enough during longer coast periods.
  Trevor Mahlmann
- Falcon 9 B1060.1 standing vertically on LC-40 at Cape Canaveral Air Force Station in advance of the GPS-III SV03 launch for the United States Air Force.
  Trevor Mahlmann
- A close-up of the number “60” atop the first stage of Falcon 9.
  Trevor Mahlmann
- The number 60 also graces the bottom of the first stage, but this is much more challenging to see on subsequent flights due to the soot buildup.
  Trevor Mahlmann

- This new booster, 1060, will add to the fleet of used rockets SpaceX has available.
  Trevor Mahlmann
- Clouds make for a nice launch.
  Trevor Mahlmann
- The Falcon 9 rocket's performance was nominal.
  Trevor Mahlmann
- How many more launches will this first stage make?
  Trevor Mahlmann
- SpaceX has launched the Falcon 9 rocket 88 times.
  Trevor Mahlmann

On Tuesday SpaceX launched its 11th Falcon 9 rocket of the year—with a brand-new first stage delivering a 3.7-ton GPS III satellite into orbit for improved navigation services. The mission's customer, the US Space Force, was happy.

"The successful GPS III SV03 launch and recovery serves as another step in our journey with industry partners to create innovative, flexible, and affordable services to meet NSSL mission objectives and propel US dominance in space," said Col. Robert Bongiovi, Launch Enterprise director.

Tuesday afternoon's launch puts the company on pace for 22 missions in this calendar year, which would break the company's previous record of 21 launches set in 2018. What seems more remarkable about this pace is that it has occurred amidst a global pandemic that has slowed operations in many other countries.

For example, SpaceX's 11 launches match the total so far this year by Russia, Europe, and Japan combined. Globally, the company ranks second only to China's state enterprise, which has attempted 15 orbital launches in 2020, two of which have been failures.

Much of the company's activity during the pandemic has been driven by its own payloads. SpaceX has launched seven Starlink

missions during the first half of this year, putting nearly 420 of its own satellites into low-Earth orbit. The company is moving forward with efforts to begin offering limited commercial Internet service by late this year or early 2021.

Barring a catastrophe, it seems likely that SpaceX will easily launch a dozen or more Falcon 9 rockets between now and the end of this year. The company has as many as 18 launches on its manifest, including half a dozen Starlink missions, a second Crew Dragon mission, a supply mission to the International Space Station, and several commercial missions. Its next launch may occur in a week, with the Starlink-9 mission, on July 8.

Thanks to the successful recovery of the first stage from Tuesday’s launch, SpaceX now has five first stage boosters at its disposal for future missions. Of those, it will be most interesting to see if, or when, Booster 1049 flies again. This first stage has already flown five flights dating back to September 2018 and could be ready for its sixth mission by the end of July—if engineers deem it safe to fly again.

Listing image by Trevor Mahlmann

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