GM’s Cruise scraps 2019 launch plans but expands San Francisco testing

Enlarge / In January 2018, Cruise said that it would begin producing cars like this before the end of 2019 for use in a commercial taxi service.

reader comments

68 with 39 posters participating, including story author

Share this story

In late 2017, Cruise, the self-driving startup that is majority owned by General Motors, announced that it planned to launch a driverless commercial taxi service by the end of 2019. The company stuck to this 2019 launch date even after Google’s Waymo missed its own self-imposed goal to launch a fully driverless service by the end of 2018.

But in a post this morning, Cruise CEO Dan Ammann now admits that Cruise won’t launch a commercial driverless service in 2019 after all. Instead, he says, Cruise will further expand its testing infrastructure in San Francisco, preparing the company for a large-scale launch at some unspecified date in the future.

“Our first deployment needs to be done right and we will only deploy when we can demonstrate that we will have a net positive impact on safety on our roads,” Ammann writes.

It has been obvious for more than a year that Cruise is likely to launch its first commercial service in San Francisco, but

Cruise says it’s now making that official. The company says it will spend the coming months laying groundwork for that eventual launch.

Cruise will be expanding its existing fleet of GM Bolt electric vehicles. To support that growth, Cruise is planning to build a massive vehicle charging station in San Francisco’s Dogpatch neighborhood. A spokesperson tells Ars that Cruise plans to more than double its pace of testing between now and the end of the year.

Cruise is also expanding its public-outreach efforts. Cruise took out a full-page ad in the *San Francisco Chronicle* and is (as Ammann puts it) “expanding and deepening partnerships with the city, first responders and other organizations that matter to San Franciscans, such as MADD and the Coalition for Clean Air.”

The whole industry is struggling with driverless technology

Cruise’s decision means that Waymo’s service in Phoenix may be the nation’s only commercial self-driving service for some time to come. And while that gives Waymo some bragging rights, it’s not clear that it’s actually a win for the Alphabet subsidiary. Waymo’s vehicles still have safety drivers behind the wheel, which pretty much guarantees that Waymo will lose money on every ride.

No one knows how long it will take Waymo, Cruise, or other companies to achieve fully driverless operation. Almost every company working on the technology has suffered setbacks in the last couple of years. In April, Ford CEO Jim Hackett admitted that Ford “overestimated the arrival of autonomous vehicles,” acknowledging that the company’s expected 2021 commercial launch may be more limited than previously expected.

Delaying commercial launch gives Cruise greater flexibility as it slogs its way through the difficult engineering challenge. Cruise can expand or contract its testing efforts as needed to support development efforts without worrying about annoying paying customers.

In late 2017, Cruise announced plans to produce a new vehicle with no steering wheel in 2019. The company released a rendering of the vehicle's dashboard in January 2018.

On Wednesday, a Cruise spokesman declined to comment on whether the company was still aiming to manufacture such a vehicle this year. In his blog post, Ammann writes that "we're well underway to creating the self-driving car of tomorrow, in partnership with GM and Honda." According to Ammann, engineers from GM, Cruise, and Honda (which has a minority stake in Cruise) are building a "new vehicle" that "completely re-imagines from the ground up what a car can be."

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1540821