Here’s why Blue Origin just ended its suborbital space tourism program

Blue Origin has “paused” its New Shepard program for the next two years, a move that likely signals a permanent end to the suborbital space tourism initiative.

The small rocket and capsule have been flying since April 2015 and have combined to make 38 launches, all but one of which were successful, and 36 landings. In its existence, the New Shepard program flew 98 people to space, however briefly, and launched more than 200 scientific and research payloads into the microgravity environment.

So why is Blue Origin, founded by Jeff Bezos more than a quarter of a century ago, ending the company’s longest-running program?

“We will redirect our people and resources toward further acceleration of our human lunar capabilities inclusive of New Glenn,” wrote the company’s chief executive, Dave Limp, in an internal email on Friday afternoon. “We have an extraordinary opportunity to be a part of our nation’s goal of returning to the Moon and establishing a permanent, sustained lunar presence.”

Move was a surprise

The cancellation came, generally, as a surprise to Blue Origin employees. The company flew its most recent mission eight days ago, launching six people into space. Moreover, the company has four new boosters in various stages of development as well

as two new capsules under construction. Blue Origin has been selling human flights for more than a year and is still commanding a per-seat price of approximately $1 million based on recent sales. It was talking about expansion to new spaceports in September.

Still, there have always been questions about the program's viability. In November 2023, Ars published an article asking how long Bezos would continue to subsidize the New Shepard program, which at the time was "hemorrhaging" money. Sources indicate the program has gotten closer to breaking even, but it remains a drain on Blue Origin's efforts.

More than 500 people spend part or all of their time working on New Shepard, but it also draws on other resources within the company. Although it is a small fraction of the company's overall workforce, it is nonetheless a distraction from the company's long-term ambitions to build settlements in space where millions of people will live, work, and help move industrial activity off Earth and into orbit.

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