

NASA targeting early February for Artemis II mission to the Moon

NASA is pressing ahead with preparations for the first launch of humans beyond low-Earth orbit in more than five decades, and officials said Tuesday that the Artemis II mission could take flight early next year.

Although work remains to be done, the space agency is now pushing toward a launch window that opens on February 5, 2026, officials said during a news conference on Tuesday at Johnson Space Center.

The Artemis II mission represents a major step forward for NASA and seeks to send four astronauts—Reid Wiseman, Victor Glover, Christina Koch, and Jeremy Hansen—around the Moon and back. The 10-day mission will be the first time astronauts have left low-Earth orbit since the Apollo 17 mission in December 1972.

Hardware nearing readiness

The mission's Space Launch System rocket has been stacked and declared ready for flight. The Orion spacecraft is in the final stages of preparation and will be attached to the top of the rocket later this year.

Early next year, the combined stack will roll out to the vehicle's launch site at Kennedy Space Center, said Charlie Blackwell-Thompson, Artemis launch director. At the pad, the rocket and spacecraft will be connected to ground systems, and after about two weeks, it will undergo a "wet dress

rehearsal.”

During this fueling test, the first and second stages of the rocket will be fully loaded with liquid hydrogen and oxygen, and the countdown will be taken down to T-29 seconds. After this test, the rocket will be de-tanked and turned around for launch.

Due to the orbits of Earth and the Moon and various constraints on the mission, there are launch windows each month that last four to eight days. In February, that window opens on the fifth, and it would be an evening launch, Blackwell-Thompson said.

After launching, the Orion spacecraft will separate from the upper stage of the SLS rocket a little more than three hours after liftoff. It will spend about 24 hours in orbit around Earth, during which time the four astronauts on board will perform various checkouts to ensure the vehicle’s life support systems, thrusters, and other equipment are performing nominally.

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