Rocket Report: Starship V3 test-fired; ESA's tentative step toward crew launch

More swaps coming?… The Vulcan rocket is many months from returning to flight for the US military. One industry source told Ars that the Space Force may not fly another mission on Vulcan before the end of the year. Space Systems Command has moved four launches of new GPS navigation satellites from ULA to SpaceX in the past two years as Vulcan encountered delays. Col. Eric Zarybnisky, head of Space Systems Command's Space Access office, said the military is "working through a significant number" of potential additional rocket swaps from Vulcan to another launch vehicle, likely SpaceX's Falcon 9 or Falcon Heavy.

ESA's first Mars rover finally has a ride. NASA confirmed Thursday that SpaceX will launch the European Space Agency's Rosalind Franklin Mars rover, perhaps as soon as late 2028, on a Falcon Heavy rocket from Kennedy Space Center, Florida, Ars reports. So why is NASA deciding which rocket will launch a flagship European Mars mission? It's a long story involving the search for extraterrestrial life, crippling political hatchets, and, of all things, Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Ars explores the mission's tortured history, a nearly quarter-century of broken promises, technical setbacks, and geopolitical drama.

Taking aim on Mars… The announcement is also notable because it is the first time SpaceX has won a launch contract for a mission to Mars. The red planet is the apple of Elon Musk's eye, with utopian concepts for a Mars settlement to go along

with SpaceX’s more tangible work on a massive rocket to actually fly there. This new rocket, named Starship, is still a ways away from reaching Mars. Therefore, it’s likely SpaceX’s Falcon Heavy, no slouch itself, will make the company’s first Mars run on behalf of NASA and the European Space Agency.

Next-gen Starship tested at Starbase. The new, juiced-up version of SpaceX’s Starship mega-rocket cleared a big hurdle this week on the path to its first launch, Space.com reports. That liftoff, targeted for early or mid-May, will be the 12th overall for Starship but the first for the vehicle’s “Version 3,” which is bigger and more powerful than its predecessors. The first Starship V3 vehicle fired its six Raptor engines on Tuesday while anchored on a test stand in South Texas. The static fire test follows a series of cryogenic proof tests earlier this year.

https://arstechnica.com/space/2026/04/rocket-report-starship-v3-test-fired-esas-tentative-step-toward-crew-launch/