SpaceX takes down Dragon crew arm, giving Starship a leg up in Florida

Pad 40 has been the primary Falcon 9 launch site for most of the rocket's history, while Pad 39A provided a location for crew launches and an augmentation to support SpaceX's growing launch cadence. But there are signs the Falcon 9 launch cadence, which reached 165 missions last year, may be peaking as the company turns its attention to Starship. And SpaceX has steadily reduced the time it takes to reconfigure Pad 40 between launches, cutting the turnaround time to less than 48 hours.

If needed, SpaceX officials said they could reinstall the crew arm for Dragon missions launching from Pad 39A.

Repairs required

Bill Gerstenmaier, SpaceX's vice president of build and flight reliability, said there's another pressing reason for removing the crew arm at Pad 39A. The bearings that connect the arm to the launch pad's tower need repairs.

"To physically get access to those, the arm needs to be removed," Gerstenmaier said. "Those bearings have to come out and they have to be reinstalled. We'll do that work at the Kennedy Space Center. And the intent there is, we don't need to put the arm back up … When we get a call-up for a mission and we have to go fly a mission, if it requires that, we have plenty of time to get the arm back up."

SpaceX has continued launching Falcon 9 and Falcon Heavy

rockets from Pad 39A amid the nearby construction work to prepare for Starship flights. “That doesn’t impact our ability to launch from the pad,” Gerstenmaier said.

That could change as SpaceX begins testing and launching Starships from Kennedy Space Center. Starship launch operations may routinely force the closure of Pad 39A to personnel.

“The right thing to do is get those bearings replaced in the environment on the ground, make some upgrades to them, and then we’ll be ready to go and put the arm back up when it’s time to go fly, if we need to go fly,” Gerstenmaier said.

https://arstechnica.com/space/2026/02/heres-why-americas-most-historic-launch-pad-is-getting-yet-another-facelift/