The world’s largest airplane may be grounded after a single flight



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- The Stratolaunch aircraft took flight for the first and only time in April.
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- The vehicle reached heights of up to 17,000 feet.
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- It flew from Mojave Air and Space Port in California.
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- But now, it seems like the airplane will never fly again.
  Stratolaunch
- Stratolaunch is reported to be ceasing operations.

Stratolaunch

- So the vehicle will probably become the second coming of the Spruce Goose.

Stratolaunch

The aerospace company founded by Paul Allen, Stratolaunch, is closing operations according to a report by Reuters that cited anonymous sources. The company will cease its efforts to challenge traditional aerospace companies in a new "space race," four people familiar with the matter told the wire service.

In response to a query from Ars about potentially ending operations, a spokeswoman for the Seattle-based company replied, "We don't have any news or announcements to share at this time. Stratolaunch remains operational."

Questions about the future of Stratolaunch arose almost immediately after Allen, a co-founder of Microsoft, died in October, 2018, at the age of 65. According to Reuters, the decision to set an exit strategy was made late last year by Allen's sister, Jody Allen. In January, Stratolaunch abandoned efforts to build a series of rockets to be launched from its large carrier plane—an ominous sign.

This cast a pall over the plane's first flight. With a 384-foot wingspan, this largest aircraft in the world took flight in April after eight years of development. "All of you have been very patient and very tolerant over the years waiting for us to get this big bird off the ground, and we finally did it," Stratolaunch CEO Jean Floyd told reporters at the time. The company reported the airplane reached speeds of 189mph and heights of 17,000 feet during its 150-minute test flight before landing safely at the Mojave Air and Space Port. But it has not flown since.

Throughout the development of the large Stratolaunch airplane—Allen founded the company in 2011, spurred by

childhood dreams of spaceflight and a desire to lower the cost of access to space—it has not been clear why such a large aircraft was needed to launch relatively small rockets. Stratolaunch had been contracted to launch the Pegasus rocket, developed by Northrop Grumman, which has a capacity of about 450kg to low-Earth orbit.

A competitor, Virgin Orbit, is much closer to market with its air launch system. The company uses a modified 747 aircraft named *Cosmic Girl*, and it's expected to begin commercial service with its LauncherOne rocket later this year. This rocket has a capacity of about 500kg to low-Earth orbit.

It now seems as though the Stratolaunch aircraft may really be the second coming of the *Spruce Goose* aircraft. This noted airplane, built in 1947 as a vanity project of the eccentric business magnate Howard Hughes, flew just a single one-mile flight at an altitude of less than 100 feet before going on display at the Evergreen Aviation & Space Museum in Oregon. It had a wingspan of 320 feet.

Listing image by Stratolaunch

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