

NASA catapults new Orion capsule into NM desert

(AP) -- NASA engineers successfully catapulted the new Orion crew capsule about a mile into the air Thursday morning as part of a test of a launch-abort system.

The launch-abort system hurtled the capsule from a desert launch pad at 7 a.m. and reached speeds of about 450 mph in just 2.5 seconds. The capsule landed about a mile north of the launch site as hundreds of onlookers, including NASA engineers and others who helped developed the project, clapped and cheered.

The launch-abort system is designed to whisk astronauts and the capsule to safety in case of a problem on the launch pad, such as a fire, or during the climb to orbit.

Jeff Sheehy, a NASA engineer working on abort system, said the test appeared to be successful.

"Everything seems to have gone just like we wanted it to," Sheehy said.

A stream of white smoke trailed from the launch pad as the unmanned abort system and capsule arched through the sky, deployed a series of parachutes and landed.

Doug Cooke, a NASA associate administrator, said the test marked the first time a launch-abort system of this type has been used for a U.S. space travel system since the Apollo rockets of the 1960s and 1970s.

"But it's much more advanced," Cooke said. "It has more technology, more capabilities."

Similar systems are used on the Russian Soyuz spacecraft that transport cosmonauts to and from the International Space Station.

The abort system has been in development for about four years and involves a trio of high-performance rocket motors that sit atop the capsule.

Heather McKay, a propulsion engineer with Lockheed Martin Space Systems, said the rocket system is designed to create more than 500,000 pounds of thrust to quickly catapult an astronaut crew from a launch pad emergency.

The Orion capsule was originally designed to take astronauts back to the moon. But President Barack Obama in February killed NASA's \$100 billion plans to return to the moon, redirecting the money for new rocket technology research.

One proposal is to send the capsule to the International Space Station to be used as an escape vehicle, so U.S. astronauts wouldn't have to rely on the Soyuz for an emergency flight home.

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Published on Electronic Component News (<http://www.ecnmag.com>)

"It will transition to some useful purpose," Sheehy said. "What that is remains to be seen. But what we've got is the basics of a crew survivability system."

Source URL (retrieved on 10/20/2014 - 2:13pm):

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