

SpaceX aims for orbit in next Starship flight

Launch window possible the morning of Sept. 22

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USA TODAY NETWORK

After more than three years of testing, the world’s largest rocket could reach orbit for the first time in its next flight.

SpaceX said the milestone will be the primary objective of the next Starship launch, set for no earlier than Sept. 22 from South Texas.

The mission would be the 14th flight test of Starship since April 2023 and the third of 2026.

The impending launch also comes at a crucial time for SpaceX, as tech mogul Elon Musk’s company races to have the Starship rocket operational in time for NASA’s next mission under its Artemis moon program. Musk, who founded SpaceX in 2002, also has grand dreams of Starship bringing humans to Mars.

SpaceX said a window could open from 8:15 to 9:30 a.m. Sept. 22 ET. If the launch needs to be postponed, a planning advisory from the Federal Aviation Administration, which licenses commercial rocket launches, suggests another opportunity is available the following day.

The morning launch window would be a departure for SpaceX, which since November 2024 has conducted Starship flight tests in the evening to allow for “better conditions for visual observations,” the company has previously said.

The last time Starship got off the ground in the morning was during flight five on Oct. 13, 2024.

SpaceX launches the rocket at its Starbase company town and headquarters in Texas near the U.S.-Mexico border.

To date, Starship has never reached orbital space in any of its 13 test flights. That’s intentional on SpaceX’s part, as the company has opted to fly the upper-stage of the rocket on suborbital trajectories “to maximize public safety while allowing for maximum learning,” SpaceX said.

But flight 14 could become the first time Starship reaches orbit. The feat would mark a significant milestone as



The fully integrated Starship spacecraft is composed of both a 236-foot-tall lower-stage booster known as Super Heavy and a 171-foot-tall upper stage simply called Starship. STEVE NESIUS/REUTERS

SpaceX works to develop Starship to become the first fully reusable launch vehicle, with both the lower- and upper-stages of the rocket able to fly multiple times.

Once again, the rocket’s lower-stage booster, known as Super Heavy, is due to land off the Gulf Coast after providing the initial burst of thrust to get the upper-stage off the ground. SpaceX then plans for Starship’s upper-stage to reach an altitude of more than 170 miles high, where it could complete six orbits of Earth during a mission lasting up to 10 hours.

A successful mission would end with the upper-stage making a water landing in the Pacific Ocean to the west of Chile, according to SpaceX.

Flight 14 could also mark the first time that SpaceX’s Starship deploys operational Starlink satellites following a series of test deployments on previous missions.

The 26 third-generation Starlink satellites – larger and more powerful than the nearly 11,000 broadband internet satellites SpaceX already operates in low-Earth orbit – could begin serving customers a few weeks after the launch,

SpaceX said.

Starship’s most recent flight test in July marked the second flight of SpaceX’s third-generation prototype of the rocket. Standing at 407 feet tall when fully stacked, the new iteration of Starship – known as Version 3, or V3 – is the largest and most powerful rocket SpaceX has ever launched.

Similar to previous designs, the fully integrated Starship spacecraft is composed of both a 236-foot-tall lower-stage booster known as Super Heavy, as well as a 171-foot-tall upper stage simply called Starship.

SpaceX has been testing Starship since April 2023. It is developing the rocket to be a fully reusable transportation system that can carry huge satellites and other payloads to space, meaning both the rocket and vehicle can return to the ground for additional missions.

Musk’s vision has long been for Starship to be an interplanetary vehicle that takes humans to Mars, where they can establish a self-sustaining colony. While the world’s richest man has indicated that SpaceX will focus on building a lunar city first, the company has al-

ready announced a human-led expedition to Mars’ orbit – though it has not set a target date.

In order for that to be possible, Starship will need to be capable of refueling midflight in a complex process that requires two Starships equipped with docking adapters to meet in orbit to transfer propellant. The maneuver is one SpaceX has yet to test.

SpaceX is also under contract with NASA to develop a lunar lander configuration of its Starship to ferry astronauts to the moon, known as the Human Landing System.

NASA has high hopes that Starship will be ready in time for a mission due in 2027 known as Artemis III. SpaceX and Jeff Bezos’ Blue Origin are competing to develop lunar landers for future crewed and uncrewed Artemis missions, both of which will be tested first in Earth orbit during the crewed Artemis III mission.

The venture will be the latest under the U.S. space agency’s campaign to return American astronauts to the moon as early as 2028 and build a lunar outpost to enable a long-term presence.

SpaceX last launched its Starship rocket July 24.

Powered by 33 of SpaceX’s Raptor-class engines, the booster provided the initial burst of thrust at liftoff before separating from the upper stage minutes after launch and making a water landing in the Gulf of Mexico, renamed in the United States under executive order as the Gulf of America. While the booster was able to make a controlled landing, it was traveling faster than intended and made what the company later referred to as a “hard splashdown.”

The upper-stage had a much longer flight, using its own six Raptor engines to fly halfway around the world before landing in the Indian Ocean. Along the way, the vehicle successfully deployed 20 third-generation Starlink satellites, which communicated with the rest of the Starlink network before they burned up in Earth’s atmosphere as intended.

The upper-stage, designated Ship 40, was able to slowly tip over and float in the ocean without exploding or sinking, as prior prototypes have done. That allowed SpaceX to haul the vehicle to shore near Australia and begin efforts to transport it back to Starbase, Texas.

Report details Alligator Alcatraz issues

DHS inspector general: Detainees were subjected to inhumane conditions

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Detainees at Florida’s Alligator Alcatraz lived in cramped metal cages, drank dirty water, showered in bug-infested bathrooms and were subjected to inhumane daily conditions, an inspection of the facility found.

The Department of Homeland Security’s Office of Inspector General conducted a surprise inspection of the detention facility in January and announced its findings Sept. 11 in a 33-page document detailing what some have called “disturbing” and “cruel” living conditions faced by detainees.

The facility did not comply with standards for environmental health and safety, medical care, food service, personal hygiene and recreation, according to the report. The special management units, which are housing units used to segregate certain detainees from the general population, also did not comply with legal standards, the report said.

Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis did not directly answer questions on whether he was aware that some people held at the now-closed facility were occasionally confined in “small metal enclosures.”

“No, look, I know that it was inspected,” DeSantis said of Alligator Alcatraz at a Lakeland, Florida, news conference on Sept. 14, shaking his head when asked whether he was aware. “The goal was not only apply it to those standards, but to exceed the standard. That’s part of the reason why we devoted a lot of resources to it.”

After the facility shuttered on June 15, authorities removed the remaining 1,400 detainees, mostly men accused of illegally entering the country, and transferred them to other detention facilities or other countries.

Facilities that house detainees for Immigration and Customs Enforcement are supposed to comply with applicable standards, which are established in the Florida Model Jail Standards and ICE’s



Standards for housing units require at least 75 square feet of floor space per inmate, whereas the housing units in Florida’s Alligator Alcatraz were “well below the required minimum,” the report said.

PROVIDED BY THE DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL

National Detention Standards.

Alligator Alcatraz staff were not even sure which standards they were or were not using to hold detainees at the time of the inspection, according to the final inspection report.

Because of the uncertainty about what standards were to be used at Alligator Alcatraz, there was also ambiguity about the treatment and daily living conditions detainees faced, the report said.

The inspection found that from July 17, 2025, to Jan. 18, 2026, 79 detainees were confined in small cages that had approximately 18 square feet of floor space for ranging periods of time.

These “restrictive” spaces have been deemed inhumane. According to the report, facility staff used these cages to give detainees time alone to “de-escalate.” One detainee spent time in such a cage because they “failed to comply with a lawful command.”

The report noted such an enclosure was “highly unconventional and does not align with standards for humane treatment,” adding “use of these small metal enclosures for any reason is unprecedented among detention facilities. The report noted such an enclosure was “highly unconventional and does not align with standards for humane treatment,” adding “use of these small metal enclosures for any reason is unprecedented among detention facilities. The report noted such an enclosure was “highly unconventional and does not align with standards for humane treatment,” adding “use of these small metal enclosures for any reason is unprecedented among detention facilities.

The inspection also found detainees were living in “cramped” conditions, with less than half the space legally required.

Standards for dormitory housing units require at least 75 square feet of floor space per inmate, whereas the housing units in the Florida facility were about 28 square feet per detainee, which is “well below the required minimum,” the report said.

Detainees were kept in the housing units for the majority of their time in the facility, leaving only for the following reasons:

- Mealtime – three times per day for 90 minutes
- Recreation – three days per week, one hour per day
- Showers – three times per week
- Medical reasons

The general population housing structures were windowless, and there were eight housing units inside each structure. These housing units, designed to hold 32 detainees, were surrounded by metal fencing on all sides and the top.

In order to meet legal standards, each housing unit would need to house a maximum of 11 detainees.

Special management units of 16 cells were surrounded by metal mesh that

measured at 8 feet by 7 feet, each holding one detainee.

In addition to being kept in cramped dormitories, detainees were subjected to drinking contaminated water and eating food at risk of spoiling, according to the report.

Detainees told inspectors they did not have access to clean water and drank from dirty cups. Clean drinking water is a requirement by National Detention Standards.

Inspectors also observed that freezers containing perishable foods were functioning at temperatures higher than 0 degrees, which may result in food spoilage that consequently results in foodborne illnesses among detainees and staff.

Detainees also are supposed to have access to an hour of recreation per day for five days a week, whereas Alligator Alcatraz detainees were given only three days per week.

Those being housed in the special management unit were allowed to leave for escorted bathroom use, legal appointments or medical appointments. One detainee in the unit reported being confined for eight days straight without recreation.

Special management unit detainees also did not have access to legal materials, preventing detainees from contacting legal representation, the report said.

Showers were limited to Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, preventing detainees from maintaining their personal hygiene, according to the inspection report, and bugs infested the shower facilities.

The Office of Inspector General made 10 recommendations to address the violations observed in the January inspection. Upper management at DHS responded to the inspection report by saying ICE would consider the recommendations. However, since the facility had been shut down June 15 – more than two months before DHS upper management acknowledged the report – all 10 recommendations were closed.

“The report reveals the depraved disregard for life that drove enormous human suffering and extensive environmental destruction in the Everglades,” said Elise Bennett, an attorney at the Center for Biological Diversity.