

## National Spaceport Policy Needs to Launch Now

By: Doug Mohny

Commercial launch activities are going to surge over the next three years with Blue Origin, Relativity Space, and Rocket Lab introducing reusable orbital launch vehicles (LVs); SpaceX starting operation of its second-generation reusable LV Starship while Blue Origin and Virgin Galactic continue their suborbital operations; and the small launch sector sorts itself out between ABL, Firefly, Rocket Lab, and some other players. Until Starship moves beyond R&D into operations, Falcon 9 launches are going to continue to increase pace with an anticipated average of a launch every 2.5 days in 2024. Furthermore, let's not forget ULA's Atlas last hurrah launching satellites for Amazon while Vulcan starts its track record.

Against this backdrop of more diverse and ever-increasing launch activity supporting the deployment of massive commercial broadband communications constellations and the Department of Defense embracing distributed satellite networks, federal spaceport policy continues to move at the speed of bureaucracy. Something must give between the hockey-stick increase of commercial activity and the snail's pace creation of a management and investment framework to support current manifests and future growth. Policy and funding must move faster or something, somewhere is going to break to the detriment of economic growth with a rippling impact on national security. DoD can't get disaggregated space assets without commercial-esque production and launch costs.

Numerous acts of Congress and executive branch policy statements have emphasized the importance of space transportation infrastructure over the past seven years, with policy papers such as The Aerospace Corporation's "A National Spaceport Strategy" white paper and the Global Spaceport Alliance's (GSA) "National Spaceport Network Development Plan" contributing to the discussion. But this effort has yet to result in standardizing operations on the federal side or securing ongoing investment into commercial spaceports.

What's important? Vertical launch clearly is based on current activity and future trends. Earlier this year, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) report to Congress on National Spaceports Policy noted increasing launch activity between 2019 and 2022, with a steady increase in both the total number of launches and vertical launches with federal operated ranges – the Cape and Vandenberg – supporting 72% of the activity. This year has already exceeded the activity of last year, and calendar year 2024 will likely set new records, barring a launch mishap or logistical logjams emerging from increased commercial activities.

One warning sign that things aren't moving fast enough has already emerged from the largest U.S. spaceport user, SpaceX. In October, company officials made a rare (for SpaceX) set of media outreach rounds prior to testifying before Congress that the FAA needed to double its licensing staff and claiming that the SpaceX Starship program is being hindered by competing with its launch reviews on its own manifest. Licensing delays on Starship could affect the Artemis III lunar landing timetable as well as SpaceX's Starlink growth.

Adding more licensing staff competes with dollars for other types of spaceport investment, such as plans for a spaceport infrastructure grant program that GSA would like to advance commercial spaceports around the country, but the near-term need is to keep launches flowing out of the Cape and Vandenberg (C&V).

Beyond the near term, a national spaceport policy needs to clarify and fund a policy of diversity and growth to reduce the dependence and choke points of C&V. This may include creating a third heavy launch site or fostering a network of smaller spaceports capable of delivering payloads into orbit. An embrace of disaggregation for in-space assets necessitates the same philosophy being applied to putting those assets into space in time of need.