

Wallops Island takes stock of damage after rocket explosion



An aerial view of the Wallops Island launch facilities taken by the Wallops Incident Response Team following the failed launch attempt of Orbital Science Corp.'s Antares rocket. (NASA, Terry Zaperach)

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Gerald Matthews can clearly see the charred launch pad where an Antares rocket exploded upon liftoff Tuesday, and said he has long feared such a mishap just 1.6 miles from his 55-acre farm.

He called the blast awe-inspiring and terrifying — it knocked his wife down, tore the door off his barn, blew out a first-floor window and knocked wrenches from their hooks on his garage wall.

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"After five minutes and seeing what it did, all the fire and the fuel burning, I really thought someone had died," he said.

But as [NASA](#) officials assessed damage from the explosion of a rocket bound for the International Space Station, they said Wednesday that they expect upcoming space missions to remain on track, including the departure of one Marylander and the arrival of another in space.

Without any launches scheduled soon at NASA's Wallops Flight Facility, there is time for officials to take more detailed stock of damage and for [Orbital Sciences Corp.](#), the contractor responsible for the launch, to learn what went wrong.

A day after the unmanned commercial rocket fell back to Earth in a fireball just seconds after lifting off, officials didn't have answers as to why the accident occurred and said it was too soon to speculate on possible causes.

Still, the accident raised questions about commercialization of the space program and use of refurbished Russian engines in rockets.

Wallops officials said Wednesday night that they had made a cursory look at the damage, finding blown-out doors and windows and severe damage to buildings and equipment near the launch pad. In a news release, they said it would take several weeks to "understand and analyze the full extent of the effects of the event."

A day after the explosion, the focus turned to recovery. The Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge and Assateague Island National Seashore were closed much of the day as NASA and Orbital conducted a sweep of the land and shoreline for hazardous materials. On Chincoteague, none were found, according to director of visitor services Michael Dixon, and the refuge was reopened at 3 p.m.

Chincoteague emergency management coordinator Bryan Rush said they received one call for a small piece of suspected debris in a driveway on the island about two hours after the incident. The investigation was handed over to NASA.

"The public should know that a lot of planning goes into every launch to make sure we are all prepared and everyone is safe," Rush said.

It's not clear when the damaged launch pad, the larger of two at the Mid-Atlantic Regional Spaceport, will be operational again. But no launches were scheduled from the pad until spring 2015, said Keith Koehler, a spokesman for NASA Wallops. No launches are scheduled from the smaller pad until early 2015.

NASA officials said the accident doesn't appear likely to significantly affect any space missions.

Among 5,000 pounds of cargo lost in the accident were supplies to be used by NASA astronaut Terry Virts, a Columbia native, and a crewmate in spacewalks scheduled for January.

NASA officials are evaluating whether those missions need to be delayed, though Virts, cosmonaut Anton Shkaplerov and European astronaut Samantha Cristoforetti are still scheduled to launch to the station Nov. 23 from Baikonur Cosmodrome, a Russian spaceport in the steppe of Kazakhstan.

Two weeks before that, Cockeysville native Reid Wiseman, Space Agency astronaut Alexander Gerst and Russian cosmonaut Maxim Surayev are scheduled to return to Earth in Nov. 10, landing back in Kazakhstan.

Mike Suffredini, the space station program manager, said Wiseman and five other crew members aboard the station watched the failed launch from space via a NASA TV feed, and were "disappointed," though they know they have sufficient resources.

"Not every day is easy. Yesterday was a tough one," Wiseman tweeted Wednesday, along with a view from the space station of the sun appearing from behind Earth.

With a Russian cargo ship due to reach the space station on Wednesday, just 14 hours after the explosion in Virginia, the loss of a Cygnus supply vessel, carrying provisions and science equipment, posed no immediate problem for the orbiting team.

"There was no cargo that was absolutely critical to us that was lost on that flight. The crew is in no danger," NASA Associate Administrator William Gerstenmaier said. Suffredini added that the crew has enough food and other supplies aboard to last four to six months.

The rocket used in Tuesday's launch, one of Orbital's Antares rockets, was powered by a refurbished version of an engine the Soviet Union used to carry heavy loads into orbit in the 1970s. The AJ-26 engine, built by GenCorp Inc. division Aerojet Rocketdyne, is a version of the Soviets' NK-33 engine developed for the N-1 moon rocket.

It was Dulles, Va.-based Orbital's third launch as part of a \$1.9 billion NASA contract for eight space station supply missions. California-based SpaceX has a similar \$1.6 billion contract and is scheduled to make its fourth launch from Cape Canaveral, Fla., in December.

Problems with the engines have been reported in the past. In May, an AJ-26 exploded during a ground test at NASA's Stennis Space Center in Mississippi. Orbital Sciences and Aerojet have not released the cause of the engine failure.

Orbital officials said it was too soon to jump to conclusions.

"We need to go through this investigation and be very thorough before we determine whether that's a factor in this or not," said Frank Culbertson, Orbital executive vice president.

Members of Maryland's congressional delegation expressed support for NASA, Orbital and Wallops as they investigate what went wrong.

"It reminds us that rocketry is still hard," Sen. Barbara Mikulski said in a statement. "But we must try the hard things to continue advancing science and innovation, and improving lives along the way."

Rep. Donna Edwards, ranking Democrat on the House's space committee, said she would ensure that the space station and scientists working on the ground receive the resources they need.

When Wiseman and former crewmate Steven Swanson, a NASA astronaut, appeared before the committee live from the space station in July, Edwards pledged to send some freeze-dried crab cakes to the station. The promise drew a smile and a fist pump from Wiseman, who is a commander in the U.S. Navy.

Resupply mission cargo often includes a small amount of personal items for space station crew, commonly local delicacies and dishes, NASA spokesman Dan Huot said. At Edwards' request, NASA's food scientists at the Johnson Space Center in Houston made the crab cakes using meat from Maryland crustaceans and freeze-dried them before Tuesday's launch, he said.

"I look forward to having those crab cakes when CDR Wiseman returns to earth and visits Capitol Hill," Edwards said in a statement.

Near the Wallops facility, which is nine miles south of the Maryland line on the Delmarva Peninsula, things were returning to normal Wednesday.

Fishermen said the incident wasn't affecting them, though Wesley "Red" McDonald, who owns Chincoteague Fisheries, said it could have been worse if it occurred during the summer tourism season.

At Wolff's Sandwich Shop in Atlantic, Va., Baltimore native Ron Wolff served breakfast and lunch, though the front window was blown out by the blast — four miles away. And he said he was eager for things to return to normal at the launch site, as well.

"My first thought was that they're going to stop the launches, that they were done," said Wolff, who does a lot of business with NASA and Orbital employees and has decorated his shop with photos and regalia from previous launches. "But that's just not the case. They're ready to build again. They're going to go out there and go again. Everything's been so positive. ... The glass can be replaced."

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