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The Sea Launch rocket successfully completed its maiden flight today, company officials announced. The event, which placed a demonstration payload into geostationary transfer orbit, marked the first commercial launch from a floating platform at sea.

"Today's successful launch demonstrates the viability of the Sea Launch system to the entire world," announced Sea Launch President Allen B. Ashby. "We are now ready to begin full-scale service, as a proven and cost-effective commercial satellite launch service."

Present at the equatorial launch site at 154 degrees West longitude was the Odyssey, a self-propelled launch platform, and the Sea Launch Commander, a floating mission control center and rocket assembly factory. On board the Odyssey in an environmentally controlled hangar was a 200-foot, flight-ready Sea Launch rocket, complete with demonstration payload.

During pre-launch preparations, the Odyssey was partially submerged for added stability. The rocket, with payload, then was withdrawn from its hangar on the platform, lifted into a vertical position, fueled with kerosene and liquid oxygen (LOX), and launched. The fueling and launch was completely automated and coordinated from the Sea Launch Commander -- the Odyssey crew having transferred to the assembly & command ship and, subsequently, moved three miles away to a safe operating locale.

Sea Launch uses a uniquely modified Zenit rocket, configured to enhance reliability and meet the program's performance objectives. Those modifications, specific to the Sea Launch system, include: Structurally stiffening the first stage of the rocket.

Replacing the guidance computer in both the Zenit second stage and the Block DM-SL upper stage.

Extending the liquid oxygen fueling capability from the Zenit second stage to the Block DM-SL upper stage to take added advantage of the Zenit's automated fueling capabilities. Prior to the commencement of the launch countdown, Sea Launch engineers confirmed the mission flight parameters were correctly loaded in the onboard computers, and that the rocket was indeed ready for lift-off. Fueling was completed, the countdown began, and liftoff occurred at 5:30 p.m. Pacific Standard Time.

Upon liftoff, the Sea Launch rocket, which consists of Ukrainian and Russian components, rose from the Odyssey, arched downrange to the east, and disappeared from view on its 60-minute climb to geostationary transfer orbit.

During flight, each of the three rocket stages performed nominally, with successful separation of the demonstration payload from the Block-DM upper stage occurring at approximately 6:32 p.m. Pacific Standard Time. Following the delivery of the demonstration payload to geotransfer orbit, Sea Launch flight control personnel reported that flight and ground data indicated both systems operated as planned.

By delivering a demonstration payload to geostationary transfer orbit, Sea Launch demonstrated the commercial launch services the company will provide to its communications satellite customers. Now, with a successful mission behind them, the Odyssey, Sea Launch Commander and their crews begin the journey back to the Home Port in Long Beach, Calif., where each vessel will undergo post-launch checks and begin preparations for the next launch.

"This initial launch is a testament to the years of hard work, dedication and international cooperation that has occurred on the Sea Launch program," Ashby added. "Each and every member of this team can take

tremendous pride in helping to achieve something which has never been accomplished before."

Sea Launch combines the resources of the world's leading aerospace and maritime companies. Partners in the international consortium include Boeing Commercial Space Company, Kent, Wash., (provides spacecraft integration and the payload fairings); Kvaerner Maritime a.s., of Oslo, Norway (the vessel builder); RSC Energia of Moscow, Russia (provides the Block-DM upper stage and its integration with the launch vehicle); and KB Yuzhnoye/PO Yuzhmash of Ukraine (provides the first two stages of the launch vehicle).

Sea Launch has firm contracts for 16 launches, and will begin commercial operations later this year.

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