

Civil

# Lockheed Martin may offer Orion as a commercial service

by Jeff Foust

July 24, 2025



The Orion spacecraft being prepared for the Artemis 2 mission. Credit: NASA/Rad Sinyak

LAS VEGAS — Lockheed Martin is examining options to offer the Orion spacecraft through commercial services, which could enable non-NASA uses of the crewed exploration spacecraft.

Kirk Shireman, the Lockheed Martin vice president who is program manager for Orion at the company, said during a session of the AIAA ASCEND conference here July 23 that the company is looking at ways to offer Orion to NASA and others as a commercial service, a move prompted by the administration's fiscal year 2026 budget request for NASA.

"It's very clear that the administration wants to move towards more commercial services," he said.  
"Lockheed Martin is exploring creating commercial services for Orion."

That budget request proposed canceling NASA's existing contracts for Orion and the Space Launch System after the Artemis 3 mission and instead relying on commercial transportation services for future lunar missions. Congress has largely rejected those plans to cancel the contracts, including funding in a budget reconciliation bill enacted earlier this month for SLS vehicles for Artemis 4 and 5.

Lockheed is pursuing commercial models for Orion, though, arguing that it would make the overall Artemis campaign more sustainable. "We have to be able to do things more sustainably and more efficiently, at a higher pace than what we're doing right now," Shireman said. "We think doing things fixed-firm price, commercial services, is something we can do to make that so."

That model would be a major shift to how Orion has been funded. Development of Orion was done under a cost-plus contract, with a later production contract structured under a cost-plus-incentive-fee model, Shireman said in an interview after the session.

How Orion would operate under a commercial model is something Lockheed is studying. "One of the questions is, where do you draw the line" of what the company does versus NASA, he said. The company currently delivers the completed Orion to NASA's Exploration Ground Systems program, and the agency then handles everything else from launch preparations through recovery after splashdown.

At one extreme, a commercial model could be a "turnkey" approach, where Lockheed would be responsible for those roles NASA performs today, including procuring the launch vehicle and handling recovery operations.

"One of the things we're talking about is what would be in the service and what's not in the service," he said. "Part of it is what we want to do, but also it's what your customers want."

One possibility, he said, would be a commercial model that gradually evolved over time, with Lockheed taking on more responsibilities towards that ultimate turnkey approach. "It's not like it will all happen at once," he said. "I suspect that would be extremely disruptive."

One challenge for a commercial services model is that Lockheed Martin does not build the entire Orion spacecraft. The spacecraft's service module is provided by the European Space Agency under an agreement with NASA, part of a barter agreement for International Space Station services.

Shireman said Lockheed has talked with both NASA and ESA about this, as well as with Airbus Defence and Space, the prime contractor for the service module. “We’re looking at what’s the art of the possible, what makes the most sense,” he said. “There’s no definitive answer yet.”

A commercial model, though, could enable Lockheed to offer Orion to other customers beyond NASA. “There’s certainly other nations that are interested in flying people out into deep space. There are other revenue streams that are beyond just sending people,” he said during the session. “In a commercial endeavor like this, you have to be very creative about what potential revenue streams are out there.”

He added, though, that NASA would likely remain the “big customer” for Orion, and after the panel said the bigger motivation for the commercial model was reducing costs rather than opening new markets.

Shireman said he would like to have any commercial service option for Orion in place by the Artemis 3 mission, even though it now appears current contracts will run at least through Artemis 5. “I’d much rather push to get things done sooner rather than later,” he said. “We’re working on it with the utmost urgency.”



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