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# Local News

## Atlas V Rocket Ready to Carry Vandenberg AFB's First Mars Mission

Launch of InSight spacecraft expected to attract thousands of spectators to Lompoc Valley



In the Astrotech facility at Vandenberg Air Force Base, the heatshield is placed on NASA's Interior Exploration using Seismic Investigations, Geodesy and Heat Transport, or InSight, Mars lander. (Chris Wiant / USAF 30th Space Wing photo)

By Janene Scully, Noozhawk North County Editor | @JaneneScully | April 30, 2018 | 9:15 p.m.



Vandenberg Air Force Base's first interplanetary mission — a NASA lander headed to Mars — has generated a lot of attention and high anticipation as launch day nears for the Atlas V rocket

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and its **InSight** spacecraft.

Liftoff of the rocket, standing approximately 190 feet tall and built by **United Launch Alliance**, is planned during a two-hour window opening at 4:05 a.m. Saturday when it is scheduled to blast off from South Base's Space Launch Complex-3.

"This should be quite spectacular because it is an early morning hour, so it should light up the sky and be very visible throughout pretty much all of Southern California, even down into Mexico," said Tom Hoffman, InSight project manager at the **Jet Propulsion Laboratory**.

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Sitting inside the rocket's payload fairing is NASA's InSight, which stands for Interior Exploration using Seismic Investigations, Geodesy and Heat Transport. The spacecraft sports a seismometer, cameras and other instruments.

Officials said the mission will study the Red Planet's deep interior with three experiments that could let scientists learn more about marsquakes and ultimately provide information about Earth.

"In essence it will take the vital signs of Mars — its pulse, temperature and much more. We like to say it's the first thorough check up since the planet formed four and a half billion years ago," said Thomas Zurbuchen, associate administrator for the **Science Mission Directorate** at NASA Headquarters.

While excitement is high, he also noted the big challenge presented by such missions once they reach the Red Planet.

"There's something we always remind ourselves here at NASA — exploring Mars is really hard," said Zurbuchen. "In fact, nothing is more difficult in robotic planetary exploration than landing on Mars."

Regardless of when the rocket blasts off, the spacecraft is expected to touch down Nov. 26 after what Hoffman called "seven minutes of terror" awaiting the craft's travels through the Mars atmosphere.

InSight, built by **Lockheed Martin Corp.**, boasts other ties to Santa Barbara County. The unique solar array for InSight was designed and built by **Orbital ATK-Goleta**, which has seen its components fly on other Mars missions.

InSight doesn't just involve Americans, with international partners from France, Germany,

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"I don't think you can imagine just how excited I am," said Bruce Banerdt, InSight principal investigator at JPL.

This Mars mission is something he dreamed about and devoted 30 years of his career to refining the concept and getting it ready to take off, Banerdt said.

Due to celestial mechanics, this mission has until June 8 to get off the ground. If it misses the window, the mission would have to wait another 26 months for the next opportunity to reach the Mars.

The launch also comes as employees represented by the International Association of Machinists are poised to vote on whether to accept the final contract offer from ULA or authorize a strike on Sunday for 600 members in local lodges based at Vandenberg, the East Coast launch site Cape Canaveral, Fla. and rocket manufacturing facility in Decatur, Alabama.

"The skilled men and women at United Launch Alliance are taking a stand to save the U.S. space industry," said Machinists Union International President Robert Martinez Jr. "Machinists Union members made ULA into the industry leader it is today. We refuse to be disrespected."

ULA representatives say they have a contingency if a strike occurs to ensure the firm meets its commitments to customers.

"We have a plan in place to help mitigate the strike's impact, and that plan would be implemented at that time," spokeswoman Jessica Rye said.

Instead of a handful of media members normally hosted for Vandenberg missions, some 178 members have received credentials for Saturday's planned liftoff.

The 14 previous Atlas V rocket launches, or the hundreds of other rockets and missiles to blastoff from Vandenberg, didn't spark this much interest.

The Santa Maria and Lompoc valleys also are home to assorted exhibits and presentations leading up to Saturday's departure.

A large number of spectators also is expected with two off-base viewing sites set up for crowds — at the Lompoc City Airport at 1801 North H St., with parking off O Street; and St. Mary's Episcopal Church parking lot at 2800 Harris Grade Road.

Guests should arrive after 2:30 a.m. InSight team representatives will be available to answer



At Space Launch Complex 3 at Vandenberg Air Force Base, NASA's Interior Exploration using Seismic Investigations, Geodesy and Heat Transport, or InSight, Mars lander has been mated atop a United Launch Alliance Atlas V rocket. (Leif Heimbold / USAF 30th Space Wing photo)

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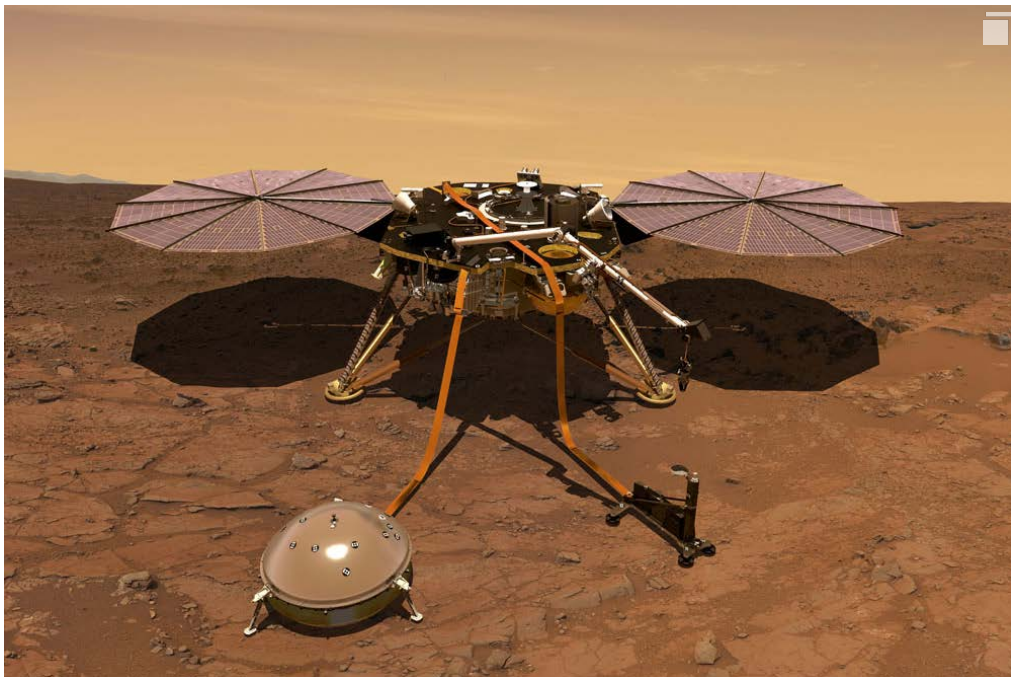
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questions, city officials said.

— *Noozhawk* North County editor Janene Scully can be reached at [jscully@noozhawk.com](mailto:jscully@noozhawk.com). Follow *Noozhawk* on Twitter: [@noozhawk](https://twitter.com/noozhawk), [@NoozhawkNews](https://twitter.com/NoozhawkNews) and [@NoozhawkBiz](https://twitter.com/NoozhawkBiz). Connect with *Noozhawk* on Facebook.



An artist's rendition of the InSight lander operating on the surface of Mars. InSight, short for Interior Exploration using Seismic Investigations, Geodesy and Heat Transport, is a lander designed to give Mars its first thorough check up since it formed 4.5 billion years ago. (NASA image)

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- [Watch Mars Mission Launch from Lompoc Airport, April 23, 2018](#)
- [Commercial Space Firms Looking at Vandenberg AFB, Colonel Says, March 7, 2018](#)
- [Mars InSight Lander Back at Vandenberg Air Force Base in Final Preparations for May Launch, March 3, 2018](#)
- [In Run-Up to Mars Mission, InSight Spacecraft Conducts Successful Ground Test, January 28, 2018](#)
- [Kids Ring in 'Noon Year' at Santa Maria Discovery Museum, December 31, 2017](#)
- [NASA Accepting Names For Mars InSight Mission From Vandenberg AFB, October 13, 2017](#)
- [Atlas V Rocket Lights Up Sky with Vandenberg Air Force Base Launch, September 23, 2017](#)
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Welcome to **Noozhawk Asks**, a new feature in which you ask the questions, you help decide what Noozhawk investigates, and you work with us to find the answers.

Here's how it works: You share your questions with us in the nearby box. In some cases, we may work with you to find the answers. In others, we may ask you to vote on your top choices to help us narrow the scope. And we'll be regularly asking you for your feedback on a specific issue or topic.

We also expect to work together with the reader who asked the winning questions to find the answer together. Noozhawk's objective is to come at questions from a place of curiosity and openness, and we believe a transparent collaboration is the key to achieve it.

The results of our investigation will be published here in this Noozhawk Asks section. Once or twice a month, we plan to do a review of what was asked and answered.

Thanks for asking!

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