

# NASA launches research balloon over state

By **KYLE SPURR**  
*The Bulletin*

**MADRAS** — The 150-foot-tall balloon, made of plastic thinner than a sandwich bag, rose above the high desert at sunrise with the goal of helping future missions in space.

The helium-filled balloon shined in the early morning sunlight as it disappeared into the atmosphere, on its way to an altitude of 110,000 feet.

A NASA-sponsored research team launched the balloon at about 6 a.m. Thursday from the Madras Municipal Airport. The balloon carried a 100-pound cone-shaped device that later in the day was dropped with a parachute over the high desert east of Prineville.

“That went well,” said Kevin Tucker, president of the Tillamook-based Near Space Corp., who oversaw the test flight. “It’s always interesting. The wind was actually chang-



Dean Guernsey/The Bulletin  
**Near Space Corp. personnel prepare to launch a large helium-filled balloon, in the background, from Madras Municipal Airport on Thursday.**

ing, and that’s a big deal. We were very careful about that.”

Tucker’s company, which produces balloons for scientific tests, partnered with researchers from the University of Kentucky to launch

the balloon and test a delivery system that could be used to return individual items from the International Space Station back to Earth. The team tracked the balloon’s flight Thursday and recovered the

dropped device.

“The Kentucky team will be gathering a lot of data as this travels from 110,000 feet back to the Earth’s surface,” Tucker said before the flight.

The university engineer-

ing students call the delivery system the Kentucky Re-Entry Universal Payload System. Their research was sponsored by NASA’s Flight Opportunities program, said NASA spokesperson Megan Person.

“The flight aims to enable testing of the technology’s electronics and communications systems in preparation for further research as part of a commercial resupply mission to the International Space Station later this year,” Person said.

NASA regularly identifies projects, such as the balloon launch, and connects research teams with companies and locations to help generate a test. In this case, NASA connected the Kentucky students with Tucker’s company and coordinated with the Madras airport.

“Today’s successful flight is one example of how the Flight Opportunities program helps advance promising space technologies before

they move on to riskier orbital missions,” said Paul De Leon, NASA Flight Opportunities campaign manager.

Tucker and his crew originally scheduled the balloon flight Wednesday, but called it off because of high winds. On Thursday, conditions were mild enough to allow the launch.

Tucker said Madras was the ideal location for the balloon flight. The open spaces around Madras offer several options to drop and retrieve the device from the balloon, Tucker said.

In addition, the Madras airport is smaller and quieter than other commercial airports in the region, which allows the team to work without interfering with other aircraft. The team still has to coordinate with the Federal Aviation Administration.

“The airport doesn’t have a huge amount of traffic,” Tucker said. “We are not causing mayhem if we do a launch.”



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