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## Fuel tank woes delay space shuttle launch again

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\* Next shuttle launch opportunity is Feb. 27

\* NASA working to repair cracks in shuttle fuel tank

By Irene Klotz

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla., Jan 6 (Reuters) - Ongoing work to fix problems with space shuttle Discovery's fuel tank will force NASA to miss an early February launch date, space agency officials said on Thursday.

Managers at the Kennedy Space Center plan to assess the work's progress to buttress the shuttle's fuel tank with metal reinforcements after cracks were found in underlying support beams.

Shuttle Program Manager John Shannon "doesn't want the workers to focus on a launch date," said NASA spokesman Kyle Herring.

"Based on the work to be completed and the testing and the analysis that's still ongoing, they pretty much said 'Let's take the (first launch window) off the table,'" he said.

A hydrogen fuel leak scuttled Discovery's first launch attempt on Nov. 5 for a cargo run to the International Space Station.

A crack in the tank's insulating foam, which posed a debris hazard to the launch, and later underlying cracks in some of the tank's metal support structures prompted NASA to retarget the launch for an eight-day period that opens Feb. 3.

The next launch opportunity is Feb. 27, but other traffic at the station, including the arrival of Japan's second cargo ship, may be rescheduled to accommodate the shuttle's delay.

"(The calendar) is pretty wide open except for visiting vehicle traffic around the station," Herring said.

Discovery is to spend about a week at the space station, one of NASA's final shuttle missions to the orbital outpost before the fleet is retired later this year.

NASA has one more shuttle flight on its calendar after Discovery -- the planned April 1 launch of shuttle Endeavour carrying the Alpha Magnetic Spectrometer particle detector -- and is hoping for funding to fly an additional cargo run aboard shuttle Atlantis in June.

The shuttles are being retired after 30 years due to high operating costs and to free up funds to develop spacecraft that can travel beyond the station's 220-mile-high (354 km) orbit.

Russia already has picked up the job of flying U.S. astronauts to and from the station at a cost of \$51 million per seat.

Cargo delivery missions to the station are being turned over to two U.S. firms, Space Exploration Technologies and Orbital Sciences Corp. (ORB.N: [Quote](#), [Profile](#), [Research](#), [Stock Buzz](#)). Both plan to fly to the station for the first time this year. (Editing by [Kevin Gray](#) and [Philip Barbara](#))

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