

Beat: Technology

Virgin Galactic spaceship crashes during California test flight, 1 dead

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USPA News - Virgin Galactic's SpaceShipTwo, the prototype for the world's first commercial suborbital spaceflight, crashed in the California desert on Friday while conducting a test flight, killing one pilot and seriously injuring the other, local and federal officials said. The accident happened just after 10:10 a.m. local time when ground controllers at the Mojave Air and Space Port lost contact with SpaceShipTwo, which was carrying two pilots for Friday's test flight over the Mojave Desert.

The incident occurred shortly after the spacecraft separated from WhiteKnightTwo, the aircraft that carried it aloft. Virgin Galactic said WhiteKnightTwo took off with SpaceShipTwo at 9:20 a.m., after which SpaceShipTwo separated at 10:10 a.m. as scheduled. A "serious anomaly" occurred about two minutes later. Authorities could not confirm statements by some witnesses that an explosion took place shortly before the crash. Virgin Group founder Richard Branson, writing on Twitter, said he was immediately flying to California to be with the team. Kern County Sheriff's Office spokesman Ray Pruitt said the co-pilot of SpaceShipTwo was killed in the crash, while the pilot suffered serious injuries after he ejected from the spacecraft. Their identities were not immediately released. The pilot was treated at the scene before being airlifted to Antelope Valley Hospital in Lancaster. The cause of the mishap was not immediately known, but Scaled Composites acknowledged that the spacecraft was using re-formulated fuel that had not yet been used in flight, although ground testing had been successful. Virgin Galactic said it would work with authorities to determine the cause of the crash. Both the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) will investigate the accident. SpaceShipTwo is a prototype for the world's first commercial suborbital spaceflight. The process requires the WhiteKnightTwo carrier to fly SpaceShipTwo to an altitude of 48,000 feet (14.6 kilometers), after which the spacecraft separates and uses a hybrid rocket motor to fly into suborbital space. Manned flights will carry six passengers and two pilots.

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