U.S. Air Force and Northrop Grumman Assemble Inert Missile, Progress Toward Sentinel Flight Testing

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Sentinel on pace for 2027 flight test

FALLS CHURCH, Va., Sept. 14, 2026 (GLOBE NEWSWIRE) -- America's next-generation intercontinental ballistic missile moved another step closer to defending the nation when Northrop Grumman (NYSE: NOC) and the U.S. Air Force fully assembled the Sentinel missile in its operational orientation. The vertical assembly demonstrates the design and integration of the missile and is a major step toward the Sentinel missile's design and suitability evaluation for flight test in 2027.

Sentinel is making progress toward fielding, a key part of the nation's strategic deterrence.

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Northrop Grumman and U.S. Air Force assembled the first fully integrated Sentinel missile, standing vertically atop a test launch pad at Vandenberg Space Force Base as part of the program's Pathfinder demonstration. (Photo Credit: Northrop Grumman)

- In partnership with the U.S. Air Force, Northrop Grumman engineers have completed the safe stacking of the Sentinel missile. This proves all missile stages, propulsion elements, the shroud, and associated components have been fully integrated into a single missile configuration.
- This milestone stacking operation is a critical step to demonstrate that every process and requirement for safely assembling the complete Sentinel missile is executable on the test pad. It validates that the team is ready to move forward to a live flight test.
- Every step – from specialized transport and mobile crane operations to full interface verification – proved the readiness to perform this complex vertical integration process.
- In parallel, Northrop Grumman and the U.S. Air Force's 719th Test Squadron completed the first flight test Critical Design Review, confirming the missile's design maturity and hardware testing meet Air Force requirements for performance, safety, and schedule for flight test in 2027.
- As part of a rigorous four-month test event, Northrop Grumman safely transported missile components from across the country to Vandenberg Space Force Base (VSFB), where the inert missile was safely stacked and de-stacked on a test pad.
- Together, these achievements demonstrate that Sentinel is moving from design into a tangible, fully integrated system that is closer to standing alert in an operational silo.

Expert:

Amanda Davis, vice president and general manager, strategic deterrent systems, Northrop Grumman: "This vertical assembly demonstrates the momentum toward test launching Sentinel in 2027 and having missiles on alert by the early 2030s, ensuring the United States' ground-based nuclear capabilities remain strong and reliable for decades to come."

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Details:

Known as Pathfinder, this dry-run exercise included the transport of missile components on specially designed vehicles from across the U.S. to VSFB, where Northrop Grumman engineers rigorously tested mechanical operations including transportation, mobile crane use and safe vertical integration while validating all interface connections on the test pad. Northrop Grumman engineers carefully coordinated every step of the process to meet the stringent Air Force requirements, including safely stacking the inert missile – a complex and precise operation critical to mission success.

The U.S. Air Force's Sentinel program is a modernization of the nation's ground-based leg of the strategic nuclear triad. Northrop Grumman leads a nationwide team of more than 500 partners under an engineering and manufacturing development contract to deliver an all new, advanced and highly capable ICBM weapon system that will be viable through 2075. Northrop Grumman is achieving substantial progress across the Sentinel program, advancing toward flight test in 2027 and initial capability in the early 2030s. From missile testing and infrastructure prototyping to supply chain readiness and augmented by a nationwide workforce of more than 10,000 dedicated professionals, Sentinel is accelerating development enabled by a transformed acquisition approach.

Northrop Grumman is a leading global aerospace and defense technology company. Our pioneering solutions equip our customers with the capabilities they need to connect and protect the world and push the boundaries of human exploration across the universe. Driven by a shared purpose to solve our customers' toughest problems, our employees define possible every day.

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