

# Test site enters Space Age

A Washington state company plans to use part of Nevada's desert to launch reusable space vehicles.

By Keith Rogers  
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From Atomic Age to Space Age, the Nevada Test Site made a giant leap Monday when an aerospace company announced plans to use part of the nation's nuclear weapons proving ground to launch and land unmanned space vehicles by 1999.

The company, Kistler Aerospace Corp., based in Kirkland, Wash., forged a pact with the government and a public corporation to use the test site for its space business. Kistler is developing the world's first totally reusable space vehicle—the two-stage, K-1—which will deliver communications satellites into low Earth orbit 300 to 600 miles above the surface, said project leader George Mueller, former head of NASA's manned space flight program.

"We actually have a mock-up of the vehicle in the computer that we can fly and do all sorts of things," Mueller told a meeting of the NTS Development Corp., a nonprofit organization funded by the Department of Energy to market the test site for commercial use.

Officials from the three entities signed a memorandum of understanding to pursue making the Rhode Island-sized test site, 65 miles northwest of Las Vegas, a continental launch area for Kistler's novel, satellite-delivery venture.

"Our purpose is to build a small fleet of light, space trucks to transport satellites to low Earth orbit," the company's brochure said. Plans by the privately held company call for the first and second stages to land softly, aided by parachutes and air bags. The second stage—the orbital vehicle—will use a rocket engine to propel itself back to the test site after launching one in a series of communication satellites that, according to the brochure, will be the "major hardware components of the information superhighway."

Mueller said before test flights can begin in 1998, the company needs to obtain licenses and meet regulatory requirements for Nevada Test Site operations. Kistler was courted for the partnership by prime test site contractor, Bechtel Nevada.

"We're hoping to get it off in the first quarter of 1999," he said about the first commercial launch of the K-1, a capsule-shaped vehicle that will stand 76 feet by 22 feet in diameter and weigh 630,000 pounds at lift-off.

Department of Energy spokesman Darrin Morgan said the test site is the company's first choice for launch and land area because at between 2,500 and 3,500 feet elevation, it offers a chance to boost heavier payloads.

Mueller and company spokeswoman Donna Hines said the \$600 million project will create 100 high-tech jobs at the test site. There nuclear weapons testing has been on hold since the last below ground detonation on Sept. 23, 1992.

Hines said the \$600 million includes development of the reusable space vehicle but, she said, the company has not decided where the vehicles will be manufactured.

Since the 1992 nuclear testing moratorium, Department of Energy contractor employment and funding levels have spiraled downward from 8,300 workers and \$1 billion to the current levels of 4,000 workers and \$400 million.

While no specific launch location has been locked in according to Terry Vaeth, acting manager of the Energy Department's Nevada Operations Office, Mueller said Kistler Aerospace is interested in an area two miles north of what

is known at the test site as the EMAD facility, or Engine Maintenance Assembly and Disassembly facility. That is where an engine test stand was built for the nation's Nuclear Rocket Development Program during the late 1950s to the mid 1960s.

President Kennedy, who according to Morgan was the only U.S. president to visit the test site, toured the EMAD facility in March 1963. The signing of the agreement at the Alexis Park by Mueller, Vaeth and Tim Carlson, president of NTS Development Corp., was preceded by Sen. Harry Reid, D Nev., presenting a \$5 million Energy Department check to the NTS Development Corp.

Reid said the test site is not only important to Nevada from a business perspective, but it will continue to be a vital cog in the nation's wheel of security because of President Clinton's directive to maintain a state of readiness to test nuclear weapons.

"It is a national asset. That is something we have to protect," Reid said. "We're not going to be setting off (nuclear) explosions so we've got to find new missions."

The check will be used as seed money to attract future commercial activities to the test site, including the Kistler Aerospace project, said John O'Reilly, NTS Development Corp. chairman.

"We're sitting in a place that has the most exciting testing and demonstration history in the world," O'Reilly said.

Asked if Kistler Aerospace will tap foreign markets for its satellite launching business, Mueller said, "We're really starting in the United States because the U.S. owns most of the world's satellites."

Mueller said the list of potential customers includes Lorai Space Systems Inc. of Palo Alto, Calif., and Teledesic Corp. of Kirkland, Wash.

Kistler Aerospace was cofounded in 1993 by Walter Kistler and Bob Citron. The company's board of directors, chaired by Robert Wang, includes John McCaw, co founder and director of McCaw Cellular Communications Inc.

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