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X-33 space plane to call Edwards home [press release]

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Date: Fri, 12 Dec 1997 16:36:40 -0800

[Via: Steve 1957 <Steve1957@aol.com>]

X-33 space plane to call Edwards home

by 1st Lt. Chris Hemrick
Air Force Flight Test Center Public Affairs

EDWARDS AIR FORCE BASE, Calif. (AFNS) -- Imagine a future where there is a space plane that lifts off from Edwards Air Force Base and flies to Malmstrom AFB, Mont. -- a trip of 950 miles -- in approximately 20 minutes.

Now imagine that future is within two years.

Edwards AFB organizations are teamed up with Lockheed Martin Skunk Works to develop and test the X-33, which is a 53 percent scale model of the future Reusable Launch Vehicle, called VentureStar.

Through flight and ground demonstrations, the X-33 will provide information necessary to allow the Lockheed Martin Corporation to make a decision on whether to proceed in the development of the full-scale, commercial single stage to orbit RLV.

If created, the VentureStar would eventually replace the space shuttle as the next generation space transportation system. "The goal is to lower costs from approximately \$10,000 per pound down to around \$1,000 per pound to get into orbit," said Chuck Rogers, Air Force Flight Test Center X-33 launch integration engineer/manager, 412th Test Wing 'Access to Space' Office.

Members of Team Edwards who are assisting the Lockheed Martin Skunk Works and the NASA Marshall Space Flight Center (the program head) with this program include the AFFTC, the Air Force Research Laboratory Propulsion Directorate (AFRL/PR) and the NASA - Dryden Flight Research Center.

"It's a real paradigm shift that the industry pays the government for products, services and facilities, as a subcontractor to the contractor," said Rogers. "We actually prepared proposals and made proposal presentations, in competition with White Sands, N.M. and the Kennedy Space Center, Fla., to be the X-33 launch site, like a

contractor competing for a contract.

"Edwards was selected to be the X-33 launch site because of the excellent launch corridor available for launches toward the northeast, and our extensive flight test infrastructure and experience, which makes this an ideal place to test experimental vehicles," said Rogers.

"Between Edwards and Utah, and Edwards and Montana are some of the most sparsely populated areas in the United States. That's very advantageous for launching a vehicle like this, since we want the program to be as safe as possible.

"We now have task agreements where we are actually a subcontractor to the contractor through our launch site and flight planning task agreements."

The X-33 will blast off from the site near Haystack Butte, located at the eastern edge of Edwards. A 15-flight program is planned for the X-33 from the launch site now under construction. The X-33 Team has already defined the first seven flights that will, if successful, provide the data needed to provide the confidence for a decision to proceed with the full scale VentureStar.

Construction has already begun on the X-33 and major components are already taking shape. The large tank that will contain the liquid oxygen has been completed and will be delivered soon. The final assembly jigs are already in place at the LMSW facility at Palmdale.

The X-33 is an unmanned, autonomous vehicle that uses differential Global Positioning System with a radar altimeter for navigation and landing. "The differential GPS will guide it through its flight and down the runway for landing," said Rogers. "Some commands can be sent up to the X-33 from the ground, but the X-33 will operate as an autonomous vehicle during normal operations. The uplink to the X-33 would only be used if the vehicle deviates significantly from its planned flight path."

The X-33 preflight and flight operations will be monitored and controlled from a refurbished operations control center located in Haystack Butte. There will also be range safety officers at the downrange sites, according to Rogers.

The X-33 is designed to travel at a top speed of Mach 15 (15 times the speed of sound), which is approximately three miles a second. The prototype will not achieve orbit, which would require a speed of more than Mach 25.

Once the X-33 is readied for flight, the engines will be fired two times on the launch pad, with the second firing having a duration of 20 seconds. The longest flight will be approximately 20 minutes at an altitude of about 55 miles. The plan is to demonstrate a 2-day turnaround for the vehicle, said Rogers.

On Nov. 14, ground was broken for the launch site near Haystack Butte. Maj. Gen. Richard L. Engel, Edwards AFB commander, predicted that the X-33 would be a world-class vehicle that researchers will use to learn incredibly important lessons.

If the venture is a success, a permanent launch facility could be built in the Edwards area. From here, vehicles could be launched in nearly any direction except south, with some launches going to equatorial orbits and some to polar orbits, returning to the central site (Edwards) to be launched again. This would allow a fleet of RLVs to be based at one site, according to Rogers.

The X-33 is expected to affirm new technology, such as the linear aerospace engine, a large composite liquid hydrogen tank and the spacecraft's lifting body design. The engines compensate for altitude and are believed to be more efficient and a better fit for the wedged-shaped aircraft than conventional bell nozzle rocket engines, according to NASA officials.

Landing sites include Michael Army Air Field at Dugway Proving Ground in Utah, and Malmstrom AFB near Great Falls, Montana. One of NASA's 747s will be used to carry the X-33 from its landing destinations back to Edwards, said Rogers.

The projected date for the X-33 rollout is May, 1999, with its first flight planned for that July. The program is scheduled to be completed by the year 2000.

Once the X-33 demonstrates the technology, the contractor will look for

private investors for the RLV, said Rogers.

"If the X-33 program proves successful, there's going to be a competition for the RLV launch site. The Edwards area will definitely be a competitor," said Rogers.

"The selection of Edwards for the X-33 launch site is a win-win for both the program and Edwards, as well as the Antelope Valley," said Johnny Armstrong, acting chief of the AFFTC Access to Space Office. "AFFTC participation in the X-33 program provides the opportunity for our personnel to hone their skills toward support of space-related programs that could provide valuable payoffs in the future, as the Air Force transitions into a Space and Air Force.

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