

NASA Selects New Orleans For Rocket Project

Alan Sayre, AP Business Writer

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — A year after the space shuttle program ended a major employment presence in southeastern Louisiana, NASA chose the Michoud Assembly Facility in New Orleans to build some components of its new heavy-lift rocket — provided the project is funded by Congress, a federal lawmaker said.

An economic development group in the region estimated that if the project goes through, hundreds of jobs will be created at Michoud.

On Sept. 14, NASA unveiled the rocket's design, calling it the largest, most powerful space rocket ever built.

The rocket is the cornerstone of the Obama administration's much-delayed general plans for its rocket design, called the Space Launch System. NASA said the rocket will give the United States a major edge to go beyond low-Earth orbit.

But the rocket — estimated by some to cost \$35 billion — still must be approved by Congress.

Republican U.S. Sen. David Vitter said NASA chose Michoud to build several rocket components, including the core stage and upper stage, the instrument ring, and integration of engines with upper and lower stages. No contractor has been selected for the work.

Michoud has been looking for a new space mission since the end of the shuttle program, which employed as many as 5,000 people in the 1980s constructing the huge external fuel tank for the shuttle.

Lockheed Martin Corp. shut down its shuttle tank production line at Michoud last September, ending the jobs of about 1,400 workers remaining in the program. Lockheed Martin built 136 tanks at Michoud.

At one time, there was hope the planned next phase of the space program — the Constellation vehicle to carry astronauts to the moon and perhaps to Mars — would replace a chunk of the shuttle jobs. But that program has been set aside by the Obama administration, which wanted to concentrate on a heavy lift rocket.

A study by Greater New Orleans Inc., an economic development group in southeastern Louisiana, estimated that 300 to 600 jobs would be created at Michoud by the project.

The organization's head, Michael Hecht, said GNOI and the Louisiana congressional delegation had been lobbying to land Michoud the work — and now would turn its attention to winning funding.

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"On one hand, the numbers are big," Hecht said. "On the other hand, the president has given a directive to NASA to land astronauts on an asteroid within 15 years. That's going to take investment."

So far, NASA hasn't specified where it wants to go or when with the new rocket. The space agency is aiming for a nearby asteroid around 2025 and then on to Mars in the 2030s.

Although the rocket resembles those NASA relied on before the shuttle, a smaller early prototype will still have 10 percent more thrust than the Saturn V used in Apollo moon missions. NASA said earlier this month that the full version of the heavy-lift rocket will be 20 percent more powerful — having the horsepower of 208,000 Corvette engines.

Even if Congress backs the project, the first test flights aren't expected to begin until 2017.

The state has been marketing Michoud to other industries in the post-shuttle era. Last year, for example, Blade Dynamics Ltd. said the company will build advanced wind turbine blades at Michoud, creating at least 600 jobs over the next decade. Hecht said the rocket contract would advance Michoud as a public-private manufacturing center.

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