

## U.S. Mothballs Airborne Missile Defense Weapon

The Associated Press

EDWARDS AIR FORCE BASE, Calif. (AP) — The Pentagon has mothballed a laser-equipped jumbo jet after 15 years and \$5 billion worth of research to develop an airborne missile defense system.

Budget cuts shot down the Airborne Laser Test Bed but some research into anti-missile lasers will continue, according to the U.S. Missile Defense Agency.

"We didn't have the funding to continue flying the aircraft," agency spokeswoman Debra Christman told the Los Angeles Times (<http://lat.ms/xEnw3z> [1] ).

The plane, a Boeing 747 mounted with a high-energy chemical laser, has been sent into storage at Davis Monthan Air Force Base, the agency said. The base near Tucson, Ariz., serves as a boneyard for military aircraft.

The Boeing had been based at Edwards Air Force Base in Southern California's Mojave Desert. It was the centerpiece of the laser-based missile defense system research program that began in 1996.

It provided hundreds of Southern California jobs through aerospace companies such as Boeing Co. and Northrop Grumman Corp.

The conclusion of the program "represents the end of a historic era in airborne directed energy research, not only for Edwards Air Force Base but for the Department of Defense at large," Lt. Col. Jeff Warmka, director of the Airborne Laser Test Bed Combined Test Force at Edwards, told the Times.

It was one in a series of missile defense programs that originated in President Ronald Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative in 1983 — the so-called "Star Wars" missile shoot-down effort that was criticized as impractical, expensive and overreaching.

The Missile Defense Agency said the program completed a key objective in February 2010 when the laser-equipped plane tracked and destroyed a test missile in flight off the Southern California coast. The nose-mounted laser fired a basketball-sized energy beam that heated and fractured the missile as it boosted into flight at about 4,000 mph, officials said at the time.

However, a second shoot-down test failed because of a software problem.

In the end, the airborne laser program never got beyond the testing stage and its budget was steadily cut.

The program was years behind schedule and billions of dollars over budget when

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then-Defense Secretary Robert Gates canceled money for a second aircraft several years ago, calling the concept fatally flawed.

Gates said the laser wasn't powerful enough to knock out missiles without forcing a plane carrying it to loiter in enemy air space. He also said an operational airborne system would have required a fleet of up to 20 aircraft costing around \$1.5 billion each.

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[1] <http://lat.ms/xEnw3z>