

NASA Officials Debut The 'Vertical Weld Center'

Kevin McGill, Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — NASA officials in New Orleans publicly unveiled a new, three-story-tall cylindrical structure Friday that is a key component in constructing heavy-lift rockets for the nation's space program.

It's called the "vertical weld center." The heavy metal framework holds state-of-the-art automated welding equipment, around which the Boeing Co. will build a major component of rockets for NASA's new Space Launch System: the "core stage" of the SLS rockets.

Each core stage will be more than 200 feet tall with a diameter of 27.5 feet. Each will be assembled in sections around the vertical weld center. Each stage will have nine sections made of eight individual curved aluminum panels welded together by the machinery that glides up and down within the cylinder — "a quarter mile's worth of welding," in the words of Boeing executive Rich Navarro, who spoke at Friday's ribbon cutting.

NASA and Boeing officials, joined by local government officials, held the ribbon-cutting in a building that holds the new machinery at the Michoud (mih-shoo) Assembly Facility in eastern New Orleans.

The Michoud facility was chosen by NASA in 2011 to manufacture SLS components — a much-needed boost to the area's economy after the end of the space shuttle program. Michoud employed thousands in the 1980s constructing the huge external fuel tanks for the shuttles.

Currently about 250 people are working on the SLS program at Michoud. That is expected to grow to between 400 and 500 as the project progresses, said Kim Henry a public affairs officer for the Space Launch System. She said the current contract calls for two core stages to be built at Michoud.

NASA unveiled plans for the Space Launch System in 2011, describing a rocket that could take people or cargo into deep space on long-duration missions. Diagrams show a rocket resembling those NASA relied on before the space shuttle program. But it is to be more powerful, — "the most powerful rocket in history," according to NASA.

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