

Air Force Changes Way It Does Space Business

TECH. SGT. TIMOTHY HOFFMAN, U.S. AIR FORCE

PETERSON AIR FORCE BASE, Colo. (AFP) — The Air Force is in the middle of a fundamental shift in the way it views its role in the nation's space business, said the Acting Secretary of the Air Force after attending the Commercial Space Industry Leaders' Conference here Dec. 10.

"We are transitioning out of being a consumer of launch vehicles," said Whit Peters, Acting Secretary of the Air Force. "In fact, the very theory behind EELV [Evolved Expendable Launch Vehicle] is to buy launch services, rather than buy launch vehicles.

"Lockheed-Martin, Boeing, and the Air Force have each put a billion dollars into EELV. It is flexible and will meet our launch needs."

Peters said space is an industry that is taking off. As the economic benefits of higher commercial production kick in, it will save the Air Force money. "The better Lockheed-Martin and Boeing do commercially, the better off we are because it will reduce our cost of getting to space."

Starting in 1999, the Air Force's Eastern Range at Patrick Air Force Base, Fla., and the Western Range at Vandenberg AFB, Calif., will see more commercial launches than military ones.

"Realistically they are both national ranges now," said Peters. "We are in an era where the ranges serve a very large commercial base."

The key issue, Peters said, is to make sure the Air Force has a robust space force during and after this shift. Air Force Space Command's people will play a critical role in ensuring that happens.

"Whatever we do, first we need to make an assessment of what the space career field is, how many people we need, and make sure we retain the assets we need to have a national defense space team," said Peters. "We are going to do this very carefully, very cautiously, to make sure that we don't screw up the space career field."

The challenge is "trying to sort out how to take what we have, keep the space career field intact, and transition from a 'consumer' to a 'provider' of services," he said.

Currently, both launch ranges provide critical infrastructure, safety, and telemetry for both military and commercial launches.

"We need to make sure those portions of the space business that can be commercialized are commercialized," Peters said. "We also need to look at shifting the safety and regulatory jurisdiction more to the hands of the Federal Aviation Administration where it is vested by law."

State governments are also playing a larger and more important role in space.

"California and Florida are very interested in providing the same kinds of assistance for space launch that they do for many of their other industries," said Peters. This assistance often includes tax incentives and infrastructure support. Alaska, Virginia, and New Mexico also have a strong interest in space, he said.

"These states see commercial launch and commercial space activities as a major economic industry. They are very interested in having a role, and we are very interested in giving them a role.

"From new roads to providing water, gas and sewer, we are very actively involved in shifting from Air Force-owned assets to using state or public service commission services. This is not just happening in Air Force Space Command, but across the Air Force."

Editor's Note: This information, published by the Air Force Space Command News Service, is in the public domain at <http://www.af.mil/news/> on the Internet.