Alaska Teams with Virginia on Space Launches

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Alexandra Gutierrez/APRN

Seven hundred and seven days. That's how long it's been since a rocket has taken off from the Kodiak Launch Complex. With huge costs and so little business, Alaska lawmakers have threatened to cut funding for the state enterprise. But now, a new arrangement with the State of the Virginia could help bring the Alaska Aerospace Corporation the contracts it needs to survive. APRN's Alexandra Gutierrez reports.

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Alaska and Virginia are the only states in the country to operate their own commercial spaceports. Alaska launches vessels along a polar orbit, while Virginia shoots spacecraft onto an equatorial path. Now, the two states have decided to team up and form a sort of space partnership.

<<5s "We want one-stop shop for U.S. launches, no matter what orbit you need to achieve.">>

That's Craig Campbell, who directs the Alaska Aerospace Corporation. His outfit has agreed to work together with the Virginia Commercial Spaceflight Authority, after both states' governors decided it was in their mutual interest. That means sharing engineering information, facility designs, and maybe even staff. Discussion of a partnership like this has been happening for years, but a formal agreement was decided on not long after former Alaska Aerospace chief Dale Nash took over Virginia's spaceflight operations.

Right now, both spaceports are seen as little guys compared to federal complexes like Cape Canaveral. Campbell says a soft merger like this should make both place more competitive.

<<14s "The end game is that we think that we can attract more business to both states by having a combined message and providing the full range of services a customer might need by just coming to us.">>

And that business is sorely needed on Alaska's end. The Alaska Aerospace Corporation has been kept afloat by large state subsidies in recent years, and lawmakers have started to lose their appetite for funding the program. While the legislature only shaved one percent off the corporation's budget this year, they made it clear that funding would be cut by a quarter next session if a launch contract weren't secured by March. That would be enough to potentially shut down the Kodiak Launch Complex.

A partnership with Virginia could make the Kodiak Launch Complex more attractive to a company like Orbital Sciences, that's in the process of trying to decide where it wants to launch its mid-sized rockets from. The Virginia Commercial Spaceflight Authority has already handled that sort of work for the company.

<<8s "We believe Orbital will like the fact that we're collaborating together on a relationship or commonality for their Minotaur system.">>

But Campbell says they're not dependent on the Virginia partnership for their survival. Even before the two states formalized their relationship, the Alaska Aerospace Corporation managed to secure a contract that will keep them in business. Campbell won't give details on the contract, but he says it will satisfy the legislature's demands.

<<7s "It's a government agency, and I can't talk anymore about it, but we've met that commitment.">>

For their part, Kodiak's legislators think this is a positive step forward for the corporation. Sen. Gary Stevens says the arrangement could be a key to making the Kodiak Launch Complex more viable as a commercial operation.

<<"Well, yes, it is. It just makes sense that we work together because the same firm wants to launch both polar and equatorial flights, and this is the way to make it happen, I believe.">>

And that should make the Alaska Aerospace Corporation, legislators, and space nerds alike all a little bit happier.