# Utah company conducts final test on shuttle rocket

(AP) -- With the U.S. space shuttle program fading, a Utah company that makes powerful booster rockets for space travel conducted its final ground test Thursday.

The firing - with the 126-foot rocket anchored horizontally to the ground - ignited more than a million pounds of propellant in a split second and took about two minutes to burn off, according to NASA and Alliant Techsystems Inc.

About 5,000 people came to northern Utah's Promontory near the Great Salt Lake to watch it fire, a company spokeswoman said.

"Anytime you test a rocket out here, it's pretty impressive," said Trina Patterson.

NASA officials said the test went smoothly but that data collected from hundreds of sensors have not yet been fully analyzed.

The solid motor is the same kind that will help lift the space shuttle in its last four scheduled missions. Thursday's test - the 52nd since testing started in 1977 - was intended to ensure safe liftoff for the upcoming shuttle flights.

"These solid rocket motors have proven themselves to be the safest and most reliable human-rated launch system," Charlie Precourt, an ATK vice president and shuttle astronaut said in a statement.

Thursday's test marks a turn for the company and the nation's space program.

The space shuttle program is retiring this year and President Barack Obama's proposed budget kills the previous administration's plans to return to the moon. NASA has no specific destination for its next mission. Officials have said Mars and the moon remain a priority but much depends on developing technology.

ATK Space Systems, a business unit of Minneapolis-based Alliant Techsystems, has laid off 970 workers in Utah since in October, citing the phase-out of the space shuttle and the Minuteman III ballistic missile programs.

Patterson said work continues on the Ares rocket, which was successfully ground-tested last fall. Another is scheduled in September.

ATK-built rockets have launched a space shuttle into orbit more than 100 times, according to NASA. Each requires two rocket motors to lift the 4.5-million pound shuttle. The rockets provide about 80 percent of the thrust during the first two minutes of flight.

Tests on space shuttle rockets over the last three decades have provided an important scientific knowledge base that will help future spaces missions, David Beaman, rocket booster project manager at NASA's Marshall Space Flight Center in Huntsville, Ala., said in a statement.