NASA hires SpaceX for science satellite launch

Irene Klotz, Reuters

(Reuters) - NASA hired Space Exploration Technologies to launch an ocean monitoring satellite, a key win for the start-up rocket company that also wants to break into the U.S. military's launch business, NASA officials said on Thursday.

The $82 million contract covers launch, payload processing and other services for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's ocean-measuring Jason-3 satellite, which is slated to fly in December 2014.

Launch would take place from SpaceX's new complex at Vandenberg Air Force Base in California.

NASA, which handles procurements for NOAA, also awarded three launch contracts, worth $412 million for Delta 2 rockets built by United Launch Alliance, a joint venture of Lockheed Martin Corp and Boeing Co.

One of the satellites earmarked for a Delta 2 flight is the replacement for a carbon dioxide tracking satellite lost in February 2009 after a failed launch on an Orbital Sciences Corp Taurus rocket.

The launches, slated for July 2014, October 2014 and November 2016, also will take place at Vandenberg.

SpaceX, which is owned and operated by internet entrepreneur Elon Musk, already holds NASA contracts worth $1.6 billion to fly cargo to the International Space Station, a $100 billion laboratory that orbits about 240 miles above Earth.

The company in May successfully flew a demonstration mission to the station, a key milestone in its efforts to win U.S. military launch contracts as well.

ULA currently has a monopoly on U.S. military launch business. But in an attempt to certify more launchers, the Air Force is expected to award a non-ULA launch services contract this year for the Deep Space Climate Observatory (DSCOVR), a former NASA Earth-monitoring satellite being repurposed by NOAA into a solar observatory. A request for bids under the Air Force's Orbital/Suborbital Program (OSP-3) was released May 11.

The criteria for new launchers was jointly developed by the Air Force, the National Reconnaissance Office and NASA.

The new NASA contract is the first evidence that Falcon 9 meets the new launcher criteria.

SpaceX will have plenty of chances to build Falcon's flight history. The rocket's

launch manifest includes more than 40 flights, including 12 station cargo flights and the Jason-3 ocean survey satellite for NASA.

(Editing by David Adams and Eric Walsh [1])

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