



Russians to Reawaken Australian Launch Site

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Russian rockets may soon be launched from the deserts of South Australia, carrying commercial payloads to low earth orbit.

Spacelift Australia Ltd. on Friday announced it had reached agreement with STC Complex-MIHT, a Russian organization commercializing the nation's space assets, to provide subcontracted launches from the South Australia desert.

"Russia already sells launchers and parts of launchers," said Max Webberly, a director of Spacelift. "But this is the first time they've sold complete services outside of Russia: the launcher, mission control, everything."

Under the agreement, Russian launch vehicles based on the SS-25 series of ballistic missiles will be flown from the little-used Woomera missile testing range, roughly 200 miles north of Adelaide.

Under a "turnkey" venture, STC Complex-MIHT will be responsible for delivering complete launch services, including transport of rockets to the Woomera site. Spacelift will be responsible for lining up customers and dealing with the Australian government.

Demonstration flights are expected by the end of 2000, with commercial operations expected to begin in early 2001. The rockets will carry payloads of up to 800 kilos to orbits of up to 1,000 kilometers, Webberley said.

STC Complex-MIHT was attracted to Australia for several reasons, including the country's geographic location, relative political neutrality and the existing facilities at Woomera, a rocket testing site roughly the size of England, Webberley said.

During the 1960s, Woomera bustled when the fledgling European space program was based there. But when European operations later shifted to Kourou, French Guiana, Woomera was dealt a crippling blow.

Since then, it's been used on and off for various flight tests and munitions testing, while the small town has housed personnel attached to an unrelated secret US electronic eavesdropping facility nearby.

On June 23, 1998, Seattle-based Kistler Aerospace Corp. broke ground at Woomera for a rocket launch pad, saying it expected to make a maiden test flight of its revolutionary K1 reusable rocket from the missile range later that year.

But Kistler's schedule continues to slip, and the company hasn't yet followed up with any significant further construction at Woomera.

Kistler's latest plan is to conduct test flights of its K1 sometime in the year 2000.

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