

GAO: Blocked fuel line hampered military satellite

July 22 2011, By DAN ELLIOTT , Associated Press

(AP) -- A small piece of cloth stuck in a fuel line may be the reason a military communications satellite hasn't reached its planned orbit since it was launched in August, government auditors said Thursday.

The Advanced Extremely High Frequency [satellite](#) is still expected to reach its intended altitude, but not until October, nearly a year late. The [Air Force](#) Space Command, based at Peterson Air Force Base, Colo., and the contractor, Lockheed Martin Corp., devised a work-around plan to get the satellite to its intended altitude.

A Government Accounting Office report said the blocked fuel line was most likely caused by a piece of cloth inadvertently left in the line during the manufacturing process.

The GAO report said the total cost of the [satellite system](#) is \$12.9 billion and that it incurred \$250 million in extra costs and a two-year delay because of quality problems with parts, including defective electronics in a power system.

It wasn't immediately clear if the blocked fuel line was included in the calculation of the extra costs and delay.

John Pike of Globalsecurity.org, which monitors defense issues, said the two-year delay is a bigger problem than the extra expense.

"You've got a lot of other things depending on the launch," Pike said,

including ground-based weapons.

Defense systems are vulnerable to delays and cost overruns because of their complexity, he said, but the quality problems the GAO found are preventable.

The Air Force revealed in November that the new satellite had an unspecified problem in its [propulsion system](#). The GAO report was the first public disclosure of the nature of the problem.

Air Force officials said Thursday they were not immediately prepared to comment on the report.

Lockheed Martin said in a written statement that "there is no smoking gun" but laboratory tests indicated the most likely cause of the problem was foreign debris introduced during manufacture.

The Bethesda, Md., company said the system was built at its Mississippi Space & Technology Center.

Lockheed Martin said the work-around plan to get the satellite into the correct orbit was on schedule and working well.

Two more Advanced Extremely High Frequency satellites are scheduled for launch in 2012. Lockheed Martin said the propulsion systems for those satellites are ready.

The Air Force said the new system is expected to begin operating in 2014, and the problem with the first satellite won't affect that.

The new system is designed to give the military more communications capacity than the current Milstar system, and it is designed to resist jamming and survive attacks.

The Air Force said Lockheed Martin's contract for its part of the project is valued at \$7.8 billion and that the company's "remaining award fee" would be reduced by \$15 million because of the fuel line problem. The Air Force didn't responded to requests for clarification, and [Lockheed Martin](#) declined to comment on the payment issue.

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