

SpaceX breaks ground on California launch pad

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(AP) -- An unused pad at the nation's West Coast launch complex is being retrofitted to send up the world's most powerful rocket.

Private rocket maker Space Exploration Technologies is spending between \$20 million and \$30 million to renovate the site that will be home to its Falcon Heavy, the largest rocket since the retired Saturn V that hurled astronauts to the moon.

SpaceX founder Elon Musk gathered with state and elected officials Wednesday for a groundbreaking ceremony at the coastal base northwest of Los Angeles.

The launch pad, built in the 1960s and remodeled over the years, has not been used since 2005, when a Titan 4 rocket last launched from there.

Crews demolished existing structures around the pad and will begin work on a massive hangar to store the Falcon Heavy, set to arrive at the base by the end of next year. Its maiden launch is scheduled for 2013.

The Hawthorne-based company will also refurbish its launch facility in Cape Canaveral, Fla., so that the heavy-lift rocket could blast off from both coasts.

SpaceX already has a NASA contract to supply the International Space Station with cargo using its smaller Falcon 9. Though the company has not yet signed customers for the Falcon Heavy, it hopes that its presence

at Vandenberg will help it gain Air Force contracts.

"We're battling to compete for the Air Force launch business," Musk said the day before the groundbreaking. "We've really made headway in every market except the Air Force."

The Defense Department relies on United Launch Alliance, a joint venture of Lockheed Martin Corp. and Boeing Co., to lift its spy satellites into low-Earth orbit.

SpaceX, which takes the unusual step of publishing its launch prices, thinks it can do it more cheaply.

A launch aboard the Falcon Heavy costs between \$80 million and \$125 million - one third the cost of a Delta 4, according to SpaceX.

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