

Plan for modified European rocket gets backing

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An Ariane 5 rocket carrying two satellites is pictured after blasting off on February 7, 2013, at the European space centre in Kourou, French Guiana. Two major figures in the European space industry on Monday backed plans to modify the Ariane 5 rocket to help it shoot larger satellites into orbit.

Two major figures in the European space industry on Monday backed plans to modify the Ariane 5 rocket to help it shoot larger satellites into orbit.

The head of the [European Space Agency](#), Jean-Jacques Dordain, said he would ask ESA member states for fast-track approval to have the modification carried out by the end of 2015.

"The proposal has been made, and this week or next week we will be discussing at the next (ESA) Launchers Programme Board," he told a press conference at the Paris Air Show.

"(...) The goal is to have the modification operational by 2015 at the latest," he said.

The idea had been floated by the new head of [satellite launch](#) firm [Arianespace](#), Stephane Israel, whose firm markets services from Kourou, French Guiana, by ESA's Ariane and Vega rockets and Russia's veteran Soyuz.

In an interview with AFP earlier this month, Israel called for a modification of the successful Ariane 5 ECA [launcher](#) so that it can handle larger electric-propelled satellites, one of the most promising areas of the satellite launch market.

The proposed "Ariane 5 ECA Adaptation" would have a larger fairing, or nose cone, to accommodate the more voluminous payload.

Separately, the new head of France's National Centre for Space Studies (CNES), a major contributor to ESA and shareholder in Arianespace, said Monday he also backed the "adaptation" plan.

"Obviously, this is something that we fully support, as it's the key to ensuring that the [Ariane 5 ECA](#) can meet trends in the satellite market," said Jean-Yves Le Gall, who moved from Arianespace to CNES earlier this year.

Israel's proposal coincides with a mood of belt-tightening among ESA's 20 nations, many of whom are grappling with budget problems at home.

Dordain, though, did not seem to think that getting the modification money would be a problem. "It's not extravagant sums... around 30 million (euros)," or \$39.9 million, he said.

France and Switzerland, whose industries would carry out most of the modification work, would be asked to contribute the lion's share, he indicated.

Israel said the Ariane adaptation would not affect plans for an Ariane 5 ME, which ESA hopes will be ready by 2017, or for its successor Ariane 6, whose maiden launch would be in 2021-2022.

Europe has been faced with tough decisions about how to cope with the fast-changing satellite [launch](#) market.

Some experts see a movement towards larger satellites but others expect a trend to smaller ones that can be launched in batches.

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