

Florida rocket launch complex is set for federal review

December 29 2013, by Scott Powers

Space Florida's plan to build a state-run launch complex on the environmentally sensitive fringes of Kennedy Space Center is ready for its federal and public vetting over possible environmental impacts.

At stake are Florida's plans for a new launch complex marketed to private rocket companies weighed against environmentalists' hopes that the Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge will be forever protected.

To compete for the growing private satellite launching business that has migrated overseas in recent decades, Space Florida, a public-private agency, wants to carve out about 200 acres known as the Shiloh site and build two state-of-the-art rocket launch complexes on 60 of those acres. The property is owned by NASA but managed as part of the wildlife refuge.

Space Florida expects a new launch center could be largely free of much of the federal red tape and the competing national priorities that can bog down private launches from the nearby KSC or from Cape Canaveral Air Force Station launch complexes. It's also close enough to the old KSC space shuttle landing strip, which Space Florida also is seeking to acquire, that the agency thinks companies could use them together.

"It's the only place, we believe, that Florida could offer the capability for a purely commercial launch site," said Dale Ketcham, Space Florida's director of strategic alliances.

But the spot is within one of the most revered natural places in Florida, a 140,000-acre sanctuary of marshes, beaches, lagoons and abundant wildlife.

"You're basically talking about the first major deviation from close to 50 years of preservation as policy for the Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge," said Charles Lee of Audubon Florida, one of several environmental groups that asked the U.S. Department of the Interior to intervene against the proposal.

In Thursday's Federal Register, the Federal Aviation Administration - which regulates all non-government [space-launch](#) complexes - published its notice to begin the public and federal agency comment period on the proposal.

People and groups who want to weigh in have until Feb. 21 to send their comments.

The FAA did not specify a timetable for completion of the environmental impact study, but a draft of the report is expected by the end of 2014.

Besides laying out all the potential environmental effects for analysis, debate and conclusions, the comment period also will allow people to suggest alternatives, such as a different site for the complex.

Ketcham said Space Florida would welcome such ideas.

"If somebody comes up with a better idea, we're OK with that," he said.

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