

SpaceX gets Air Force certification toward launching military satellites

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Rocket company SpaceX has reached a major milestone toward its goal to launch the U.S. government's most sophisticated national security satellites.

The upstart firm, based in Hawthorne, Calif., announced Friday that the Air Force certified its Falcon 9 rocket after poring through data from three of the rocket's successful flights that took place over the last year.

SpaceX still has more requirements to meet before it can formally compete for the multibillion-dollar program, but qualifying the three launches was the company's biggest hurdle. It expects to satisfy the remaining requirements later this year.

Now the groundwork has been laid for SpaceX to vie for one of the world's most lucrative space programs, called Evolved Expendable Launch Vehicle. Previously, the Air Force had only one company that was certified for missions to launch the military's most precious satellites into orbit.

For eight years, the Pentagon has paid Boeing Co. and Lockheed Martin Corp. - operating jointly as United Launch Alliance - to launch the government's pricey spy satellites without seeking competitive bids.

In recent months, the arrangement has been embroiled in controversy on Capitol Hill over escalating costs and the cozy partnership. A bipartisan group of seven senators also wrote Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel

asking for more scrutiny.

It came to a head in April when SpaceX, formally known as Space Exploration Technology Corp., filed a bid protest in the U.S. Federal Claims Court to challenge the Air Force's contract with United Launch Alliance. The U.S. government has recently filed a motion to dismiss the suit.

At issue is a long-term contract, which guaranteed the Air Force's purchase of 36 rocket cores from United Launch Alliance to be used in national security launches without the possibility of competition. According to the Air Force, this bulk-buy strategy will save \$4.4 billion in the long run.

SpaceX called it an "egregious" contract that will "needlessly cost taxpayers billions of dollars."

The Government Accountability Office said the Evolved Expendable Launch Vehicle program had increased by \$28.1 billion to \$64 billion over the last fiscal year. It also said the [launch](#) program could be worth as much as \$70 billion through 2030.

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