

Calif. space tourism firm launches S. Korea deal

December 18 2009, By JOHN ANTCZAK , Associated Press Writer

(AP) -- A California company developing a rocket plane for space tourism announced Thursday that it has an agreement with a nonprofit group in South Korea to conduct launches in that nation.

Mojave-based Xcor Aerospace said in a statement that it was selected to supply launch services to the Yecheon Astro Space Center, an organization that operates an aerospace training center, an astronomy research center, a planetarium, and commercial helicopter tourism 150 miles southeast of Seoul.

Yecheon has formed a coalition to fund about \$30 million in costs to bring the rocket plane to Korea for [space tourism](#), educational, scientific and environmental monitoring missions, Xcor said.

Xcor spokesman Mike Massee said in an interview that a memorandum of understanding has been signed and Xcor has received an initial payment, but he could not disclose the sum or the ultimate value of the project.

The deal requires approval of the U.S. government to station the rocket plane in South Korea, and Xcor said it has taken on specialized export-control consultants and legal counsel.

Xcor CEO Jeff Greason said in the statement that it is believed to be the first time that a U.S. commercial suborbital [launch vehicle](#) will undergo the export licensing and approval process.

A contract would be modeled on the so-called wet leases used in commercial aviation in which airlines lease not just an aircraft but its crews, maintenance and other essential elements.

Xcor Chief Operating Officer Andrew Nelson described it as a way to safely operate, maintain and provide physical security for the rocket plane while ensuring that U.S. export control issues are addressed.

Lesser known than its Mojave Airport neighbors who are building [SpaceShipTwo](#) for Sir Richard Branson's Virgin Galactic space tourism operation, Xcor has conducted 66 flights with two rocket-powered airplanes and is now developing a reusable two-seat rocket plane for suborbital trips into space.

The first version, the Lynx Mark I, is expected to fly for the first time late next year or in early 2011, Massee said. The Korea operation would use a production model dubbed the Lynx Mark II.

The Lynx is designed to operate like an airplane, using a runway for takeoff and landing.

Virgin Galactic unveiled SpaceShipTwo earlier this month at Mojave. It will be flown by two pilots and have seats for six passengers. Like its historic predecessor, SpaceShipOne, it will be carried to high altitude by a special jet and released. It will then fire its rocket and climb into space, then glide back to Earth.

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