

State proceeds in spaceport project

Ben DiPietro
Associated Press Writer

HONOLULU (AP) — Struggling to diversify its slumping tourism-driven economy, the state continues to look to the heavens and the fledgling, but potentially lucrative commercial space launch industry.

Hawaii is the only state looking to build a spaceport with private money, but it is in competition with other states and countries seeking a share of the launch

business.

In the U.S., California and Florida are the leaders in the commercial space race since they have existing military facilities to launch from, while Alaska and Virginia also are angling for a piece of the market. Experts view commercial space launches as a growth industry since NASA was prohibited from using money for commercial launches after the space shuttle Challenger disaster in 1986.

The infusion of high-paying, high-tech jobs is a key part of

Hawaii's plan to diversify its economy, which remains mired in recession because of a lack of visitors, the loss of sugar and pineapple jobs and the aftereffects of Hurricane Iniki.

The shutdown of the Big Island's Hamakua Sugar Co. may give new impetus for development of a spaceport in Ka'u, according to Mufi Hannemann, director of the Department of Business, Economic Development and Tourism.

There recently has been increasing private sector interest in the

idea, he said recently. But as for the feasibility of launching satellites into orbit from the Big Island, "the jury is still out on that," he said.

The state hopes the advantages of its launch location and the fact that it will be a private facility without military-imposed scheduling restrictions will lure investors and customers.

"Hawaii is making as serious an effort as anybody," said Jim Pagliasotti, policy director of the

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Aerospace States Association, a group of 26 states exploring the commercial opportunities of space. "If they can put this together, they can take a large part of the launch market."

Launches from either of two proposed sites on the Ka'u Coast could be sent into either polar or equatorial orbits, the only place in the nation where that can be done, said Ken Munechika, head of the state's Office of Space Industry.

That edge could save companies time and money by not having to build two launch facilities in different parts of the country, and would save fuel since rockets launched from the site would need less energy to be placed into some orbits, Munechika said. It also could reduce travel and other costs of moving workers and equipment between two sites.

The Hawaii spaceport is to be built with money from private developers, and the total construction cost is estimated at \$450 million, but the cost of the first phase will be much less, Munechika said.

The Office of Space Industry

has spent \$4.5 million on the project since 1987, he said.

Planning has been in the works for six years, since Gov. John Waihee proposed the idea in his first State of the State address. The state hopes to complete an environmental impact study by the end of the year, 18 months behind schedule. The study's conclusions will determine whether the project proceeds.

If it does, the state's spaceport plan projects suborbital launches of small rockets could begin by mid-1995. The entire facility is expected to be completed by 1998, and will include three launch pads, plus payload, administrative and various support facilities.

Construction could be delayed by lawsuits by opponents who say the spaceport will ruin the area's environment and rural life-style. Others, including Big Island Mayor Steve Yamashiro, say the project should be scrapped because it's taken too long and costs too much with no benefit to date.

"The spaceport proposal, strongly opposed by the community, has already cost millions of taxpayer dollars without providing a single benefit for local citizens," said Barbara Bell, cochair of the Hawaii Green

party.

It would be foolish to stop now, Munechika said. "You don't build a project of this magnitude without spending money preparing for it."

Several environmental questions must be addressed, including the risk of placing the spaceport downslope from two active volcanoes, the threat of tsunamis and earthquakes, and potential accidents from transporting fuel and supplies.

There also are questions about whether the spaceport would worsen air pollution and impact astronomy research at Mauna Kea, one of the world's leading observation areas. There will be no spaceport if the EIS shows it will disrupt astronomy research, Munechika said.

There also are concerns with ancient Hawaiian archaeological sites well as concerns for the life-style of the small fishing villages that dot the area and the sea life they make their living from.

A spaceport is expected to create between 350 and 700 jobs, said Thomas Hayward, head of the state's Hawaii Space Development Authority. About 70 percent of the permanent jobs would go to local residents. The initial construction would create 350 jobs.