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U.S. Firm in Talks on Buying Kuznetsov Rockets

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The U.S. company that relies on phased-out Soviet engines for its $1.9 billion contract with NASA is looking to use their updated version.

Orbital Sciences Corporation has sent Michael Hamel, its senior vice president, to the engine manufacturer in Samara for a reconnaissance mission.

The Kuznetsov plant is investing to the tune of 2 billion rubles ($65 million) to start producing an upgraded model of the rocket engine.

Orbital Sciences successfully test launched its Antares rocket in April, which utilized the Soviet-made engine that was originally designed for the aborted Soviet lunar program.

The company sourced the engines from its U.S. contractor Aerojet, a company that purchased a few dozen of these engines from Kuznetsov in the mid-1990s and modified them.

Known in Russia as NK-33, the kerosene-fueled engines that initially rolled off the assembly line in the 1960s and 1970s adopted a new name after the reworking, AJ26.

Julie Van Kleeck, vice president of launch business unit at Aerojet, accompanied Hamel on the trip to Russia.

Hamel and Kleeck toured the Kuznetsov plant on July 15 but did not sign any deals, a plant spokeswoman said. They also had a meeting with Samara region Governor Nikolai Merkushkin the next day.

"It's remarkable that the engine was created during the rivalry between the U.S.S.R. and U.S.A., and now we are equal partners for commercial flights to the International Space Station," Hamel said, according to the Russian-language statement from the governor's office.

Orbital Sciences has a $1.9 billion contract with NASA to make eight cargo deliveries to the International Space Station in the wake of the retirement of the space shuttles. The test flight in April and another test launch this coming September are part of the contract.

Aerojet has enough engines to equip rockets for the contract but needs more going forward. It has a tentative contract to buy 50 upgraded engines from Kuznetsov from 2016, when it will start producing them, through 2024, a spokeswoman for United Engine Building Corporation, which includes Kuznetsov, said Wednesday.

Aerojet could also strike a deal with another Russian rocket engine producer, NPO Energomash, which now sells its RD-180s to U.S.-based United Launch Alliance for making the Atlas 5 rocket. ULA is a joint venture whose stake holders include Lockheed Martin and Boeing.

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