

U.S. Court Issues Injunction Prohibiting Russian Rocket Engine Purchases

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An Atlas V preparing for launch from Vandenberg Air Base

The U.S. Federal Claims Court has issued a preliminary injunction against United Launch Alliance, the producer of the Atlas V launch vehicle, prohibiting it from purchasing any additional Russian-made RD-180 rocket engines.

The injunction, published by the Washington Post on Thursday, prohibits the U.S. Air Force and United Launch Alliance, or ULA, "from making any purchases from or payment of money to NPO Energomash," the Russian state-owned company that produces the RD-180 engine for export and use in the first stage of the Atlas V rocket.

The injunction also prohibits any payment to entities "subject to the control of Deputy Prime Minister [Dmitry] Rogozin," pending relevant U.S. government approval. As noted by the injunction order, the Obama administration placed sanctions on a series of top Russian officials on March 16, Rogozin being one of the more prominent officials on the list.

However, the order does not apply "to any purchased orders that have been placed or moneys paid to NPO Energomash prior to the date of this Order," the injunction said. ULA currently has two years worth of RD-180 engines stockpiled, a precaution taken in the event of a Russian ban on export of the valuable engines.

The injunction comes two days after Space Exploration Technologies, more prominently known as SpaceX, filed a complaint against the U.S. Air Force accusing it of entering in to an unlawful contract with ULA — a joint venture between the Boeing Company and defence contractor Lockheed Martin — to purchase 36 Atlas V rocket cores in bulk.

SpaceX CEO Elon Musk also alleged that the Air Force contract may violate U.S. sanctions against Russian Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin, who is responsible for oversight of Russia's defense and space industries.

U.S. government actions against Rogozin were reinforced on Monday when the Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control issued a "Specifically Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons List" that carried three specific references to Rogozin. Additionally, the State Department expanded its export license restrictions on high-tech defense articles and services.

The Federal Claims Court, in light of these measures, found that "the public interest and national defense and security concerns" warranted the issue of a preliminary injunction prohibiting the purchase of additional RD-180 engines.

The decision to halt purchase of the engines comes at a time when many U.S. government and aerospace officials have begun to question the reliability of the RD-180 supplies as tensions between the U.S and Russia have risen to a crisis point over the latter's actions in Ukraine.

On Wednesday, lawmakers on Capitol Hill proposed legislation that would authorize U.S. Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel to develop a domestic alternative to the RD-180 that would subsequently be made available to all interested U.S. launch providers, Reuters reported.

The authorization would mandate that development of the new engine be completed "no later than 2019."

However, industry experts and analysts are divided over the estimated time and financial commitment required for the U.S. to successfully complete work on an alternative to the powerful Russian engine.

See also:

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