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NM spaceport hosts launch of student experiments

SUSAN MONTOYA BRYAN, Associated Press 

UPHAM, N.M. (AP) — In the remote desert of southern New Mexico, hundreds of students from across the state, Arizona and Texas gathered at dawn Friday to watch as a rocket whisked a year's worth of their work into space.

The SL-5 rocket lifted off following a bright flash as engineers from UP Aerospace supervised about a mile away from the crowd. At five times the speed of sound, the rocket carried the students' experiments to a record 73.5 miles high.

The high altitude winds turned the contrail into a corkscrew, and the students belted out their approval with a chorus of "cool" and "awesome."

More than two dozen experiments were launched from Spaceport America as part of this year's annual student launch sponsored by NASA through its Summer of Innovation Program.

George Whitesides, president and CEO of Virgin Galactic, the commercial space venture founded by British billionaire Richard Branson, said it's moments like the rocket launch that capture children's attention.

"We know that as a nation, we need to do a better job of getting our kids excited about science and technology. It's essential to our future, and I think space still has a really big role to play in terms of getting kids tied to those subjects," he said. "We're probably going to have 500 future astronauts because of this event."

After the payload reached its maximum altitude, a parachute deployed and the experiments were returned to earth so data could be downloaded by the students.

Some experiments were designed to monitor changes in temperature, pressure and radiation. Others challenged the viability of alternative power sources, while one tested whether a cell phone was capable of receiving text messages at the edge of space.

Being able to text family and friends will be important once commercial space travel becomes common, according to the excited group of middle school girls from Las Cruces who worked on the project.

"We've been planning and talking about it a long time," said Tatiana Prieto, one of the students. "Now we finally saw it go up, and it was like 'Yeah!'"

Virgin Galactic, the spaceport's anchor tenant, and the state Spaceport Authority plan to continue working with the New Mexico Space Grant Consortium to find ways to use the spaceport as a learning center for the region.

The \$209 million taxpayer-financed spaceport is expected to be complete by the end of the year. It's the world's first dedicated spaceport, which aims to become ground zero for the burgeoning commercial spaceflight industry.

Some estimate Virgin Galactic could begin flights out of the spaceport sometime in 2013, but Whitesides declined Thursday to give any specific dates. He said the company is testing its spacecraft and rocket systems.

State officials also want to add to the tenant list companies for other commercial space endeavors, such as research and payload delivery.

Spaceport executive director Christine Anderson said she sees potential for many support businesses to spring up around development of the spaceport, resulting in more science and technology jobs.

As the students waited for their payload to be returned, Anderson talked about the spaceport and their future.

"Dream big, and don't let anybody tell you that you can't do something because you can do whatever you set your mind to, and today is a good lesson for that," Anderson said.

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