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Army supports student launch program

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By **Drew Hamilton**

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WHITE SANDS MISSILE RANGE, N.M., June 1, 2011 -- A scientific rocket screamed skyward at Spaceport America May 20, 2011, as students from all over New Mexico, as well as Texas and Arizona came to see their scientific payloads fly into space during a scientific and educational mission supported by White Sands Missile Range.

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The rocket carried 27 experiments from elementary, middle schools, high schools and universities into space before returning to earth, and landing at White Sands Missile Range, or WSMR. Under the New Mexico Space Grant Student Launch Program, students were able to assemble their own scientific payloads to be launched over 65 miles above the earth.

The student payloads, divided into seven different canisters within the rocket were a varied as the students who built them. Crammed into the canisters were cameras, radiation monitoring sensors, and other measurement devices, along with some more advanced systems.

"We had things from roasting green chilies to marshmallows to using a piezo electric board, tesla coils, and a lot of temperature monitors and Geiger counters, a bunch of variety, and a lot of magnetic experiments also," said Bruce Lewis with the space grant office and spaceport office.

The rocket launch represented more than just an educational opportunity for the students, but a cooperative effort between different organizations and companies. Even though the rockets flight began at Spaceport America, a state-run spaceport, it ended its flight on White Sands Missile Range and used range airspace.

"This is White Sands airspace that we're flying in, so White sand controls that airspace for us. We have a great relationship with White Sands and we had a lot of support from (WSMRs) team," said Pat Hynes, director of the Space Grant Consortium.

The recovery of the rocket, and its return to the students was conducted by White Sands Missile Range's Army Air. While the rocket was awaiting recovery White Sands Missile Range Chief of Staff Dan Hicks spoke with the students about the future of high technology careers and the kind of opportunities in those fields offered by WSMR and the Army.

"The majority of the workforce consists of engineers and mathematicians and other scientific fields. We've got about 4,000 people on the test center and garrison side that have that type of background. So in order to be specific to what it takes to get a job out at White Sands one of the key things would be to continue your education into college and get a degree," Hicks said.

Hick Also answered questions from the students about spaceflight, how the range operates and the kind of radar systems used to track rockets like the one used in the experiment.

Data collected by these various devices had a variety of applications, with some being educational in nature, giving the students a glimpse of what it means to send something into space, and other experiments having more direct applications to the future of space flight.

"Some of it is great data; some of it is fun data. So you're got both the fun stuff and some things that are collecting real empirical data that NASA may be able to use in the future," Lewis said.

One experiment bridged the gap between the two. An experiment conducted by Aztec High School harvested the physical motion of the rocket in flight and converted it into electricity

which was then used to power a small electric oven and roast a green chili. While roasting green chilies isn't critical to the future of space flight, the electricity could have other purposes.

"What we wanted to see is if you could power something in the rocket just using piezo electrics, just using the own forces of the rocket to generate it's own electricity while flying up into space," said Braden Goimarac, from Aztec High School's "Black Ops" science team.

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