

High-altitude airships company picks New Mexico for base

August 18 2020, by Russell Contreras

A technology company aiming to send up high-altitude airships to monitor crops and bring broadband has chosen New Mexico for its U.S. production center, state Economic Development Secretary Alicia J. Keyes announced Tuesday.

The Switzerland-based Sceye picked the state as its U.S. base for stratospheric flights for earth observation and communication after spending more than \$50 million in developing the stratospheric airship and building infrastructure, state officials said.

Officials said the company founded by global humanitarian Mikkel Vestergaard will locate its manufacturing operation in the state and will create 140 high-paying manufacturing and engineering jobs.

The move comes as Sceye works to develop a fleet of airships that could be parked for long periods of time about 65,000 feet (19,812 meters) in the air. Once in the sky, the blimp-like airships would monitor crop conditions, climate change, and human trafficking. The aircraft also may improve communication connections between drones, aircraft, satellites, and expand broadband.

The airships are controlled by pilots on the ground who move them as weather and the Earth's atmosphere changes.

"New Mexico has been home to many innovative companies and Sceye's approach to broadband and methane monitoring is game-changing,"

Keyes said. "It's these types of disruptive companies that will drive economic development in the state for years to come."

At New Mexico's Spaceport America, a company called SpinLaunch is testing technology that would launch satellites into orbit with kinetic energy. Virgin Galactic has 150 employees in the state as it prepares for commercial space flights.

While preparing for more airship flights, Sceye is negotiating a deal to provide broadband access to the Navajo Nation and other underserved areas.

Keyes said for years the state has struggled with building an infrastructure on the ground to bring broadband to rural areas. "This could eliminate that problem," she said.

"The (COVID-19) emergency has amplified the need for universal access to the advantage of a networked world," Vestergaard said in a statement. "There is a massive gap between the connected and unconnected."

Keyes said Sceye will start with five airships and could expand to other areas of the country.

In January 2019, Vestergaard, former CEO of global public health companies Vestergaard and LifeStraw, stepped down from those companies to exclusively focus on Sceye's expansion. Sceye was founded in 2014.

In recent years, the company has conducted research and development of its technology at Roswell and Moriarty, New Mexico, airports.

Last year, the state gave the company a \$2 million loan to help it to

rebuild following a windstorm that caused extensive damage to its hangar and airship.

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Citation: High-altitude airships company picks New Mexico for base (2020, August 18) retrieved 2 May 2024 from

<https://techxplore.com/news/2020-08-high-altitude-airships-company-mexico-base.html>

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