

Blue Origin selects Alabama for rocket engine production, ending Florida's hopes

Emre Kelly, FLORIDA TODAY

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(Photo: Win McNamee, Getty Images)

Blue Origin, the spaceflight company owned by Amazon founder Jeff Bezos, said Monday it plans to open a rocket engine production facility in Alabama, ending Florida's hopes of winning the work.

The company selected Huntsville to build a 200,000-square-foot facility for manufacturing its BE-4 engines, bringing with it \$200 million in investment and 342 new jobs, the Huntsville Madison County Chamber of Commerce said in a press release.

The engine is slated to power Blue Origin's orbital New Glenn rocket and could be the primary propulsion for United Launch Alliance's Vulcan, both of which are still in development. The start of construction of the manufacturing facility in Huntsville, however, is dependent on ULA awarding the final contract.

Before selecting Alabama, Blue Origin was considering Florida among possible sites for BE-4 manufacturing. The company is building a 750,000-square-foot New Glenn rocket factory at Kennedy Space Center's Exploration Park on Merritt Island, which should be completed by early 2018.

[In California, SpaceX launches second Falcon 9 in two days \(/story/tech/science/space/spacex/2017/06/25/california-spacex-launches-second-falcon-9-two-days/427240001/\)](#)

[SpaceX bets the house to become satellite internet provider \(/story/tech/science/space/2017/06/02/spacex-elon-musk-betting-house-proposed-satellite-internet-constellation-fcc/363023001/\)](#)

"Florida's in the mix," said Scott Henderson, Blue Origin's launch site director, during a February 2016 presentation to the National Space Club Florida Committee in Cape Canaveral.

But the selection of Huntsville isn't necessarily surprising — the region is known for rocket propulsion research and is home to NASA's Marshall Space Flight Center, which is responsible for development of the agency's massive Space Launch System rocket, and the U.S. Army's Aviation and Missile Command, or AMCOM.

The state plays an important role in setting space policy in Congress, where U.S. Sen. Richard Shelby chairs the appropriations subcommittee responsible for NASA funding.

"At the end of the day, none of us were surprised that the engine manufacturing went to Alabama," Dale Ketcham, chief of strategic alliances at Space Florida, told FLORIDA TODAY. "That's what Alabama does."

With ULA potentially the BE-4's initial primary customer, he said, its nearby Atlas V and Delta IV rocket assembly center in Decatur also played a role in the decision.

"We would have liked to have had it, but you don't win them all," Ketcham said.



Blue Origin, based in Kent, Washington, is also renovating Cape Canaveral Air Force Station's Launch Complex 11 and nearby Launch Complex 36, where it will test engines and launch New Glenn rockets.

Cummings Research Park will be home to Alabama's new manufacturing facility.

"Alabama is a great state for aerospace manufacturing and we are proud to produce America's next rocket engine right here in Rocket City," said Rob Meyerson, President of Blue Origin, in a press release. "The area's skilled workforce and leading role in rocket propulsion development make Huntsville the ideal location for our state-of-the-art manufacturing facility."

Nearly 300 private aerospace and defense contractors operate in the Huntsville area, according to the chamber of commerce release.

If ULA selects the BE-4 as the Vulcan's primary propulsion over Aerojet Rocketdyne's AR1 engine, two of the American-made engines would be used on the first stage, ending the company's reliance on Russian RD-180 engines.

ULA declined to comment on when it plans to choose the Vulcan's main engines, but has repeatedly said Blue Origin is the front-runner because it is further along in development.

Seven BE-4s, which burn liquified natural gas and produce 550,000 pounds of thrust each, will vault New Glenn rockets to space.

Contact Emre Kelly at aekelly@floridatoday.com or 321-242-3715. Follow him on Twitter at [@EmreKelly](https://twitter.com/EmreKelly) (<https://twitter.com/EmreKelly>) and on Facebook at [Emre Kelly](https://www.facebook.com/emre.kelly) (<https://www.facebook.com/emre.kelly>).

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