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The Boeing Company [NYSE: BA] has begun flight testing for the Advanced Tactical Laser (ATL) Advanced Concept Technology Demonstration (ACTD) program and has generated "first light" of ATL's high-energy chemical laser in ground tests, achieving two key milestones in the laser gunship development effort.

During the "low-power" flight tests, which began Oct. 10 and conclude this fall, the ATL ACTD system will find and track ground targets at White Sands Missile Range, N.M. A low-power, solid-state laser will serve as a surrogate for ATL's high-power chemical laser.

To prepare for the tests, the ATL aircraft, a C-130H from the U.S. Air Force 46th Test Wing, was outfitted with flight demonstration hardware at Crestview Aerospace Corp. in Crestview, Fla. The hardware includes the beam director and optical control bench, which will direct the laser beam to its target; weapon system consoles, which will display high-resolution imagery and enable the tracking of targets; and sensors.

Boeing fired the high-energy chemical laser for the first time in ground tests on Sept. 21 in Albuquerque, N.M. -- an achievement known as "first light." Ground tests of the laser will conclude this fall. By 2007, Boeing will install the device on the aircraft and fire it in-flight at mission-representative ground targets to demonstrate the military utility of high energy-lasers. The test team will fire the laser through a rotating turret that extends through an existing 50-inch-diameter hole in the aircraft's belly.

"ATL will transform the battlefield by giving the warfighter a speed-of-light, precision engagement capability that will reduce collateral damage dramatically," said Pat Shanahan, vice president and general manager of Boeing Missile Defense Systems. "The start of flight and laser testing shows that Boeing is making solid progress toward making this revolutionary capability a reality."

Boeing is developing ATL for the U.S. Department of Defense through an ACTD program.

ATL will destroy, damage or disable targets with little to no collateral damage, supporting missions on the battlefield and in urban operations. ATL will produce scaleable effects, meaning the weapon operator will be able to select the degree and nature of the damage done to a target by choosing a specific aimpoint and laser shot duration. For example, targeting the fuel tank of a vehicle could result in total destruction of the vehicle, while targeting a tire might result in the vehicle stopping without injury to the driver.

Boeing's Advanced Tactical Laser industry team includes L-3 Communications/Brashear, which made the laser turret, and HYTEC, Inc., which made various structural elements of the weapon system.

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For further information:

Maria McCullough

Boeing Missile Defense Systems

office: (703) 414-6158

maria.mccullough@boeing.com

Marc Selinger

Boeing Missile Defense Systems

office: (703) 414-6138

marc.selinger@boeing.com
