Boeing-led Airborne Laser Team Fires Tracking Laser at Airborne Target

The Boeing Company [NYSE: BA], along with industry teammates and the U.S. Missile Defense Agency, yesterday successfully fired the Airborne Laser (ABL) weapon system's tracking laser in-flight at an airborne target for the first time.

During Thursday's test, the modified Boeing 747-400F took off from Edwards Air Force Base, Calif., and used its infrared sensors, part of ABL's Boeing-developed battle management system, to find the simulated missile exhaust generated by an instrumented target board located on the U.S. Air Force's NC-135E Big Crow test aircraft. The ABL aircraft then pointed and fired its track illuminator laser (TILL) at the target to gather target-tracking data, a key step in a missile engagement. The TILL, a solid-state laser, is part of ABL's beam control/fire control system, developed by Lockheed Martin [NYSE: LMT].

"The Airborne Laser team has successfully transitioned to the next major test phase, completing the first in a series of in-flight laser firings at an airborne target," said Pat Shanahan, vice president and general manager of Boeing Missile Defense Systems. "This first firing confirms that ABL can find an airborne target, precisely fix the track illuminator laser onto that target and use the laser firing results to track the target. This is an important step toward demonstrating the aircraft's ability to engage a flying target."

In upcoming flight tests, ABL will fire its other solid-state laser, the beacon illuminator laser, in conjunction with the TILL to demonstrate the ability to compensate for the atmospheric turbulence that the missile-killing, high-energy chemical laser would encounter in its path to the target. The aircraft then will complete an engagement sequence by firing both illuminator lasers and using a surrogate high-energy laser to simulate a target shootdown.

When these tests are completed, the program will install the actual Northrop Grumman-built [NYSE: NOC] high-energy laser in the aircraft to prepare for the first intercept test against an in-flight ballistic missile in 2009.

Boeing is the prime contractor for ABL, which will provide a speed-of-light capability to destroy all classes of ballistic missiles in their boost phase of flight. Boeing provides the modified aircraft and the battle management system and is the overall systems integrator. ABL partners are Northrop Grumman, which supplies the high-energy laser and the beacon illuminator laser, and Lockheed Martin, which provides the nose-mounted turret and the beam control/fire control system.

A unit of The Boeing Company, Boeing Integrated Defense Systems is one of the world's largest space and defense businesses specializing in innovative and capabilities-driven customer solutions. Headquartered in St. Louis, Boeing Integrated Defense Systems is a $32.4 billion business with 72,000 employees worldwide.
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