

Rocket Explodes During Test Firing

MATAGORDA ISLAND, Texas (UPI) A 55-foot rocket that entrepreneurs had hoped would put private business into space exploded during a test firing Wednesday, blowing its top part almost 500 feet in the air.

The Percheron rocket, owned by Space Services Inc. and scheduled for a test launch later this month, was ending a five-second "burp" test when it suddenly exploded. There were no injuries.

"We're not sure what happened," said SSI spokesman Charles Chafer. "We think a liquid oxygen valve might have gotten stuck or it could have been a weakness in the bulkhead. We have engineers out there looking at it."

Chafer said the explosion cost SSI \$1.2 million and set back the fledgling commercial rocket venture, America's first, at least six months. The company hopes it eventually will be able to put satellites into space at a cheaper rate than the government.

"That's how long it took us to build the first one," he said. "We might be able to build another one a little quicker, but it will probably be about the same."

Chafer insisted the failure would not terminate SSI's hopes of putting satellites in space.

"Welcome to the rocket business," he said. "These things are going to happen. We're disappointed, of course, but we'll keep going."

The original test firing was scheduled for last week but recurring failures to get the rocket engine to fire forced a delay until this week.

Chafer said the countdown went without problems Wednesday and ignition occurred on schedule.

He said the first five seconds of the burn were good, as the bright yellow flames burst from the bottom of the rocket and black smoke started rising around it.

At the end of the test, however, the rocket — bolted to its launch pad — suddenly exploded. The upper two-thirds blasted about 500 feet into the air and then fell harmlessly back to earth.

Engineers initially said the liquid oxygen valve could have become stuck, allowing too much kerosene fuel to pour into the firing chamber. They also speculated a weakness in the walls of the rocket might have caused the brilliant explosion.

The test occurred on the desolate barrier island about 60 miles northeast of Corpus Christi on private property owned by Dallas oilman Toddie Lee Wynne.

The explosion started a small fire that crews managed to extinguish.

The specially built Percheron rocket was built by GCH Inc. of Sunnyvale, Calif., and designed to be the workhorse of the first commercial rocket venture in this country. GCH spokesman Tom Brosz in Sunnyvale, Calif., said GCH had other rockets on the designing board. He said he did not understand how the liquid oxygen valve could cause explosion.

"I'll need more data before I can begin to offer any more analysis," he said.

The Percheron is about the size of the Redstone rockets NASA used to launch Alan Shepard and Gus Grissom into suborbital flight in 1961. The rocket is 55-feet long, weighs 75,000 pounds and is 4 feet in diameter.