

The Space Test Program

The Space Test Program provided space flight opportunities for research and development payloads sponsored by Department of Defense agencies that did not have their own funds to develop, launch, and operate spacecraft. Each year, the Air Force Secretariat convened the Space Experiments Review Board, comprised of voting members from all DoD agencies. The SERB reviewed requests for space flights and produced an annual list of requests that it had approved, arranged in order of priority for available flights.

Each year, STP flew as many SERB payloads as possible, considering priority, opportunity, and funding. SMC and its organizational predecessors had managed STP for DoD since the program officially began in 1965.

Space Systems Division first set up an office for planning and coordination of flights for space experiments on 1 December 1963. An important consideration in planning for such flights was the fact that the new Titan IIC launch vehicle (which made its first flight on 18 June 1965) would provide more opportunities for launching secondary payloads. As the most powerful launch vehicle in the inventory, it would be capable of launching more and heavier payloads on each mission than it was then scheduled to carry.

In view of that, a memorandum of 6 May 1965 from the Director of Defense Research and Engineering asked the Air Force to identify experiments worthy of including in the new vehicle's multiple payload dispensers. On 12 July 1965, General Schriever, then commander of Air Force Systems Command, ordered the establishment of a command program managed by SSD to rank all experiments whose sponsors proposed to use the excess payload capacity of the new Titan IIC.

AFSC expanded the types of launch vehicles that would be used in the program a few months later. SSD soon named the new program the Space Experiments Support Program and in September 1965, convened the first meeting of representatives from various government agencies to select experiments for available launches.

On 12 March 1968, the Air Staff announced that SESP would be responsible for providing all flight opportunities for research and technology experiments sponsored by government agencies. The program was renamed the Space Test Program in July 1971 to better describe the broader mission it was beginning to perform. DoD customers with their own funding were able to access all the services of the Space Test Program without having to compete at the Space Experiments Review Board.

By 1982, the DoD, which had been directed to develop space systems for launch on the Space Shuttle, began flying most of its STP experiments on the Shuttle. After the Challenger accident in 1986, this "all eggs in one basket" strategy proved to be a big problem for DoD's access to space. This resulted in a shift back to Evolved Launch Vehicles and, in some cases, changes to DoD space systems.

In 1988 the Shuttle began flying STP experiments again, but the shift was toward standardized payload integration system design to lower costs and to enable potential integration of experiments into other launch vehicles, should the Shuttle become unavailable.

The first SESP mission (P67-1) was launched on 29 June 1967 using a Thor Burner II launch vehicle. It consisted of two separate satellites carrying geodesy and aurora experiments for the Army and Navy. By September of 2009, STP (currently administered by the Space Development Group based at Kirtland AFB, New Mexico), had flown 200 missions and well over 435 experiments. Many of those missions tested concepts and technology for later operational military satellite systems. In fact, from the early 1970s to the early 2000s, every operational satellite system for DoD flew preliminary experiments through SESP or STP.

For photographs on the STP program, please visit the LAAFB website's SMC History & Library section, along with the Schriever Space Complex Heritage Center.