

By Rebecca Neipp February 1, 2012 [Link](#)

Rep. Kevin McCarthy, at a meeting last week with management and industry leaders of Mojave Air and Space Port, pledged his commitment to keeping overregulation from choking off growth and innovation for aerospace technology — which serves as a significant economic force in the region.

"When you travel around the country at a time when everyone is struggling, it is exciting to see what is going on here in Mojave," said McCarthy, whose congressional district includes the IWV and Mojave.

Although Mojave has been a nexus for aviation milestones for decades, the last 10 years have seen it develop into the birthplace of the commercial space industry. Companies like Burt Rutan's Scaled Composites, which won the Ansari X Prize when SpaceShipOne became the first civilian vessel in space, have been a driving force in charting the course for this new industry.

McCarthy credits this, in part, to a temporary reprieve on FAA regulations, which is set to expire this year. McCarthy's meeting in Mojave was to establish smart regulations that serve to facilitate safety, rather than throw up arbitrary roadblocks.

"Sometimes people create regulation based on fear, not data and science," said McCarthy. "I am just asking that it be based on just that — data and science. In any industry you want to protect yourselves, but you also want to allow the level of calculated risk necessary for growth." McCarthy said he is hopeful for another extension on the hold on regulation. If it is granted, that eight-year period should be used to collect the data upon which the future regulation should be crafted.

Air and Space Port Manager Stu Witt said that while Mojave has seen industrial mishaps during that time, none has yielded death or significant injury. He added that none of those incidents could have been prevented by standing regulation.

And that was during a time of tremendous growth for the air and space port. When he arrived in Mojave 10 years ago, the facility housed 14 companies with maybe 450 employees.

"Today we have 69 contracts and on the order of 2,600 people showing up to work at Mojave," said Witt. "That didn't happen by accident. We had to create an environment where people actually wanted to be here.

"Jeff [Greason, president and cofounder of XCOR] said it better than anybody — 'We have created the Silicon Valley of a new industry.'"

That industry has seen billionaires from the U.S. and Great Britain bringing multibillion-dollar projects to Mojave. "There are 200 jobs opening in Mojave. That is something the region needs to celebrate," said Witt.

"This is a brain trust," said McCarthy. "We are not building a call center, we are literally bringing together rocket scientists."

During McCarthy's visit to Mojave he visited the site of Stratolaunch, Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen's space transportation venture. Allen, who had previously collaborated with Rutan on the SpaceShipOne, is setting out to build the largest-ever aircraft to serve as an air-to-orbit launch vehicle.

Kevin Mickey of Scaled Composites, which is building the craft, was on hand to summarize the project for his listeners. Stratolaunch signed a 20-year lease with Mojave and expects to have their carrier in the air in about five years. In the meantime, the project is seeking 40 engineers and 60-100 shop personnel to work on the project.

Mickey said that Allen's history and success on SpaceShipOne led to the Stratolaunch contract. "Our world-class reputation for aviation firsts made us an obvious choice."

Both McCarthy and Witt pointed to the broad network of industry and elected leaders engaged in commercial space as key to the thriving aerospace culture in Mojave.

McCarthy said that having Mojave's Supervisor Zack Scrivner as chair of the Kern County board will keep aerospace issues in front of the county.

Another critical role in that partnership has been filled by David McBride, director of NASA's Dryden Flight Research Center. McBride said that the work at Mojave goes hand-in-hand with the Dryden mission to expand science and technology through flight. To that end he has established partnerships with the burgeoning talent of the private sector.

"What one person can do for an organization is enormous," Witt said of McBride.

But Cathy Hansen, member of the Mojave Air and Space Board of Directors, said that Witt's impact at Mojave has been just as significant. "Stu always finds a way to say yes. Come up with an idea that is outside the box and he will find a way to make it work."

And the result has been an entrepreneurial haven that continues to put a tiny high-desert town on the international map.