

By Steven Mayer February 2, 2012 [Link](#)

SpaceShipTwo, scheduled to carry tourists to space beginning in 2013, undergoes an unpowered glide flight test over Mojave in late 2010. Courtesy of Virgin Galactic

The emerging commercial space industry is proving to be an important economic engine in eastern Kern County -- and beyond.

But some have worried that the industry's "learning period" could be stalled if a moratorium on federal regulations is allowed to expire at the end of this year. Now it appears that won't happen.

Rep. Kevin McCarthy, R-Bakersfield, the House majority whip, was able to insert a provision in the Federal Aviation Administration reauthorization bill that will extend the moratorium nearly four more years to Oct. 1, 2015.

The House is expected to vote on it Friday, a McCarthy spokeswoman said. All Senate Democrats have signed onto the conference report, so the measure has bipartisan support in both houses.

"The commercial spaceflight industry is already having a profound economic impact right in our backyard, and this action ensures that it can keep on innovating and creating jobs," McCarthy said in a statement Thursday. "This industry has boomed over the past several years in part because of smart policy that tempered government overregulation."

On Sunday, The Californian reported extensively on the impressive increase in investment and jobs at Mojave Air & Space Port over the past decade. McCarthy appeared to echo the reports.

"By extending the learning period, we're opening the door for continued growth and job creation right here in Kern County, while also helping keep America at the forefront of space travel and exploration," McCarthy said. "I look forward to seeing what comes next from this burgeoning industry."

The original eight-year moratorium was intended to allow the industry to mature before the FAA began issuing regulations covering passenger and crew safety. However, the industry has developed more slowly than some had projected.

At Mojave Air & Space Port in 2004, Burt Rutan's SpaceShipOne became the first privately funded vehicle to carry a human to suborbital space.

But in the intervening years, no one has attempted a licensed commercial spaceflight. Test flights of the second-generation SpaceShipTwo rocketplane are continuing in Mojave, but commercial operations are not expected until 2013 at the earliest.

Regardless, those who count on the space port as a bastion of research and development were encouraged by McCarthy's announcement.

"This is welcome news for our community, state and nation," spaceport CEO Stu Witt said in the release. "This will prevent onerous regulations from hampering a burgeoning commercial space industry that will provide tremendous economic and technological advances, not only in California but across the nation."

George Whitesides, president & CEO of Virgin Galactic and The Spaceship Company, said the extension "will play a critical role in ensuring that the U.S. remains the home of aerospace innovation.

"Each of the companies in this sector is fully committed to developing safe vehicles and systems," Whitesides continued. "Thanks to the leadership of Congressman McCarthy, and the certainty offered by this extension, Virgin Galactic and other companies will be able to continue creating new jobs across the country."

The congressional action will not directly affect the regulatory authority exercised by the state of California. XCOR Aerospace CEO Jeff Greason, whose operations are located in Mojave, told The Californian last month that state regulations are adversely impacting his business, which includes the development of the Lynx, a two-person rocketplane designed to take tourists to suborbital space.

But Greason applauded the federal legislation.

"The action taken by Congress will preserve the regulatory regime for commercial space which continues to attract space companies from around the world to do business in the United States," he said in a statement. "This regime, under which the FAA can generate any safety regulation for which real flight experience shows a demonstrated need, while avoiding regulations based on speculations or opinion about future events, allows new innovations to be tried as quickly as possible."