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Area aerospace quest to continue

Boeing's landing of major military contract was a loss for Mobile, state

By Patrick Rupinski Staff Writer

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EADS' recent failure to win a major military contract to build a new generation of air-refueling tankers in Mobile has not ended plans to build an aerospace industry in Tuscaloosa County.

"Aerospace is still a prime target for us," said Dara Longgear, executive director of the Tuscaloosa County Industrial Development Authority.

For more than two years, the authority has recruited the aerospace industry. That effort would have been greatly helped if the European Aeronautic Defense and Space Co. had won the \$35 billion contract to build 179 tanker jets.

In a move that stunned Alabama officials, the Pentagon on Feb. 25 instead awarded the contract to Chicago-based Boeing, which plans to build the giant aircraft in Washington state and Kansas. On Friday, EADS decided not to contest the Pentagon's decision.

EADS' bid called for building the tankers in Mobile and hiring about 2,000 workers there. But thousands of additional workers likely would have been hired at the factories that would make the parts for the aircraft.

West Alabama's proximity to Mobile would have helped it recruit some of those suppliers.

"It would have been a big boost if EADS won because it would have created some opportunities," Longgear said Monday. "But it still does not change the growth that Alabama is seeing in aerospace."

Alabama has more than 330 companies in the aerospace industry that employ about 140,000 people, according to the Economic Development Partnership of Alabama. About two-thirds of the aerospace companies are in the Huntsville area, where they support NASA and the military.

Additional aerospace companies can be found in the Tennessee Valley, the Birmingham area, the Anniston area, Southeast Alabama and along the state's Gulf Coast.

West Alabama is the one area of the state where the industry is almost non-existent. Excluding the Montgomery area, only a few aerospace companies are located west of Interstate 65 between the Birmingham and Mobile areas.

Last year, Tuscaloosa was a finalist for a General Electric plant that will make coatings for jet engines. GE in December picked Auburn for that plant.



The Associated Press

This undated photo provided by European Aeronautic Defense and Space Company (EADS) shows an aerial refueling tanker aircraft, that EADS North America has offered to the U.S. Air Force as the KC-45, as it refuels an F-16 fighter aircraft via a refueling boom system. EADS is competing with Boeing Co. to win a \$35 billion contract to build nearly 200 giant airborne refueling tankers, to replace the Air Force's Eisenhower-era KC-135 planes. EADS' recent failure to win a major military contract to build a new generation of air-refueling tankers in Mobile has not ended plans to build an aerospace industry in Tuscaloosa County.

But Longgear said Tuscaloosa County has a trained and productive labor force and a pro-business environment, the things most sought by the aerospace industry.

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“They are looking for the same things that made the auto industry a success here,” he said.