

NASA says duPont can't keep engines

by Paul M. Krawzak - CNS

WASHINGTON - NASA reversed itself Thursday, agreeing with congressional critics that duPont Aerospace in La Jolla, Calif., should not be able to keep two jet engines it acquired with federal funds during a now aborted research project.

In a letter to Rep. Brad Miller, D-N.C., NASA said it had informed duPont Aerospace President Tony duPont that the space agency was asserting the government's right to the engines, valued at \$1.5 million.

DuPont's 19-year, \$63 million government-funded research project, to develop an aircraft that could hover like a helicopter through the use of a targeted stream of jet exhaust, ended this year when Congress cut off funding.

The project was a favorite of Rep. Duncan Hunter, R-Alpine, Calif., who kept it afloat by inserting tens of millions of dollars in special funds for the aircraft in congressional spending bills.

Hunter championed the aircraft as something that could be used to ferry Navy SEALs and other special operators behind enemy lines, but the Defense Department repeatedly derided it as a waste of money.

NASA initially concluded that its 2002 grant to duPont allowed the company to keep the engines when the project ended.

But in the letter to Miller, William W. Bruner III, NASA assistant administrator for legislative and intergovernmental affairs, said officials "likely erred" by not including a stipulation in the \$3 million grant saying the engines belonged to the government.

Bruner said officials at NASA Glenn Research Center in Cleveland, where the grant originated, are "initiating action to assert the government's title to the engines currently in the possession of duPont, and - have informed duPont officials verbally that duPont should take no action inconsistent with the government's ownership rights."

DuPont was unavailable to react to the decision. When contacted late Thursday after the NASA letter was delivered, an employee at the company said duPont had already left for the day.

DuPont likely would have retained title to the engines had not Miller, chairman of a House Science investigations subcommittee, sent a complaint to NASA last month.

Miller raised objections to duPont keeping the engines, since most federal grants specify that government funded property goes back to the government when a research project ends.

Congress' decision to cut off funding for the aircraft followed a hearing by Miller's subcommittee last June, which highlighted the criticism the project had received.

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