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BODY:

11/12/02 - WASHINGTON -- The Air Force's senior space official said a rocket test failure has sounded a warning and underscores the need to apply the resources necessary for assure access to space.

Peter B. Teets, undersecretary of the Air Force and director of the National Reconnaissance Office, told members of the National Space Club on Nov. 4 that a turbine-blade failure during an RL-10 engine test could ground some of the nation's fleet of rockets.

The RL-10, designed by Pratt & Whitney in 1958, is an upper-stage engine used in Centaur and Atlas II rockets, as well as the Delta IV rocket scheduled for its first launch Nov. 16. "It's a common, single point of failure," Teets said. "It's a bit of an alarm bell. We need assured access to space, and we need to put necessary resources in it to get it."

The engine in question lost two turbine blades during a hot-firing test. Teets said the engine had about 2,500 seconds of hot-firing time, which is more than a normal mission engine would have, yet was still within the engine's design life.

The engine failure is the second setback the space program has had in a month. A handling incident occurred in October on a Delta II rocket being prepared to launch a **Global Positioning** System satellite, according to Christina Greer, spokesperson for the Space and Missile Systems Center at Los Angeles Air Force Base, Calif.

"A crane operator misunderstood a hand signal and lifted rather than lowered," she said. "As a result, some bolts and flanges were broken."

Although the incident was serious enough to delay the launch of the **GPS**, Teets said he is confident that repairs will be made.