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Progress report on electric-propulsion satellite project

Monday 9 March, CNES President Jean-Yves Le Gall took part at the Ministry for the Economy, Industry and Digital Technologies in the review of the Aviation and Space plans that are among the 34 projects selected by President François Hollande under France's NFI new industrial policy. CNES has been tasked with leading the electric propulsion satellite project.

This meeting to review the Aviation and Space plans was chaired by Emmanuel Macron, the Minister for the Economy, Industry and Digital Technologies, and Alain Vidalies, the Secretary of State for Transport, Maritime Affairs and Fisheries.

Commercial telecommunications satellites today account for half of the European space industry's revenues, surfing on the wave of a booming market fuelled chiefly by export business. This is a domain where French industry excels and most of these satellites are built in France. To maintain its strong position in this market, industry must adapt quickly to evolving requirements, in particular the recent emergence of lighter and cheaper all-electric satellite buses. By 2020, more than half of all satellites sold will be all-electric. The plan laid out under the NFI initiative, which CNES has been tasked to lead, seeks to help Airbus Defence & Space and Thales Alenia Space (TAS) to design, develop and validate their electric satellite buses in orbit, and to assist Snecma in developing its high-power electric thruster, which will be a key component of these buses.

The development phase (2014-2016) is underway, with contracts awarded by CNES having received €25 million in funding under the government's PIA future investment programme. The next phase (2017-2018) will cover in-orbit validation to demonstrate product performance, starting with ADS's Eurostar bus and Snecma's PPS 5000 thruster for Eutelsat's EUTELSAT 172B satellite, scheduled to launch atop Ariane 5 in 2017. The PIA will also fund part of in-orbit validation activities. The concerted efforts of the government, CNES and industry have secured rapid results: after a difficult year in 2013, ADS and TAS signed nine contracts in 2014, capturing nearly 40% of the world market. Three of these contracts are for all-electric satellites covering the full spectrum of power requirements, demonstrating the utility and commercial potential of the products developed through this project.

After his presentation to the ministers, Jean-Yves Le Gall commented: "This progress report was most useful, demonstrating the key role the NFI electric-propulsion satellite project is playing to ready us for the challenges ahead. CNES is channelling every effort into helping industry to adapt to a fast-moving and highly competitive environment, proving once again that it remains a key driver of innovation for jobs."

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