Dec. 7, 2006
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Cal Poly Students Play Key Role in First U.S. Launch of CubeSats

SAN LUIS OBISPO, Calif. — When a U.S. Air Force Minotaur rocket blasts off from the Wallops Mid-Atlantic Flight Facility in Virginia on Dec. 11, it could launch an exciting new relationship between California Polytechnic State University and NASA.

The rocket will carry Cal Poly’s P-Pod CubeSat orbital delivery system designed and built by a team of aerospace engineering students at the university.

Cal Poly AERO students Roland Coelho, Lori Brooks, Jonathan Brown and Wenshel Lan worked with NASA Ames Research Center, the Center for Robotic Exploration and Space Technologies and engineering students from Santa Clara University on GeneSat-1, a 10-pound satellite that will carry bacteria that researchers will analyze to determine the effects of space flight on microscopic life. Cal Poly’s P-Pod will deploy the 10 x 10 x 30 centimeter GeneSat-1 once it is carried aloft by the Minotaur rocket. Santa Clara students’ focus was on post-launch satellite communications.

The NASA Ames-designed GenSat-1 is a fully automated, miniaturized spacecraft system that contains a micro-laboratory, including sensors and optical systems to detect protein development and specific genetic growth in bacteria. It’s the first CubeSat to carry a biological payload into space.

“The GeneSat-1 is a great example of the kind of sophisticated science a CubeSat can deliver at a relatively low cost,” says AERO Chairman Jordi Puig-Suari. “Our previous CubeSat projects were launched in Russia. If successful, the GeneSat-1 could be the first of many using the Air Force launch vehicle that, hopefully down the line, could be launched from Vandenberg (Air Force Base).”

Coelho, who says the Cal Poly students have been working on the project for about a year, praised the “intense collaborative effort” between the students and professional engineers, adding: “This important biomedical testing shows CubeSats aren’t just for college students to say they put something into space.”

More information on the launch is available online at www.cubesat.atl.calpoly.edu or www.crestnrp.org.

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