

9/7/2005 Welsh Development Agency: Unmanned Flights Make Wales World Centre of Excellence

The official opening of a world centre of excellence for the development and testing of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) by First Minister for Wales Rhodri Morgan marks a milestone in aviation history.

The First Minister will officially open ParcAberporth Unmanned Systems today in Aberporth, West Wales and the event will be marked by the largest flying demonstration of UAVs ever to be held in civilian airspace in the UK.

ParcAberporth is a key part of the Welsh Assembly Government's plans for the regeneration of Cardigan and West Wales. The Park will include a business and incubation centre with research and development facilities for a UK-based UAV Centre of Excellence providing a focal point for a growing cluster of UAV Systems and related businesses.

Construction work on the first phase of ParcAberporth was completed in August 2005 and is funded through the Welsh Assembly Government and through European Structural Funds. Funding totalling £8.6 million has already attracted a further commitment of £7.5 million from the public and private sector. The project aims to create 230 jobs in the first three years, with the capacity for up to 1000 jobs in total.

The UAV sector is worth around £1 billion a year worldwide but this is expected to increase significantly with the predicted growth of civil applications. On the eve of the official opening of ParcAberporth, the First Minister announced a major collaborative cross-sector development between the Welsh Assembly Government, the world-renowned Institute of Grassland and Environmental Research (IGER), QinetiQ and the Boeing Company to develop civil applications for UAVs. Civil applications could include environmental and meteorological sensing, disaster/emergency monitoring, maritime and coastal surveillance, geological survey, mineral exploration and crop monitoring. UAV systems and civil applications of this nature have a substantial economic potential UK-wide.

Since the launch of ParcAberporth UAV Centre of Excellence last year there have been a number of significant developments in the UAV sector. Over the past year, the UK's Autonomous Systems Technology Validation Programme ASTRAEA has been developed by a UK industry collaboration. Wales' role in ASTRAEA will combine demonstration activity at ParcAberporth, work on safety and diagnostics at the University of Wales Aberystwyth and secure communications technology at EADS Newport. The ASTRAEA programme is worth £10 million for Wales and has also been launched today at ParcAberporth.

In addition, the Ministry of Defence and Thales UK have signed the £700 million Watchkeeper contract and today's flying demonstration will feature the maiden flight of the Hermes 450 in UK - one of 2 UAVs to be used as part Watchkeeper contract. This will be the first time a UAV above 150kg has ever taken off, flown and landed from a civilian runway and flown between civil and military airspace.

The First Minister said: "Wales has celebrated some major developments in the aerospace industry within the past year including the maiden flight of the Airbus A380 superjumbo, while GE Wales has been named as the first link in a worldwide network of service centres for the Engine Alliance's GP7200. The official opening of ParcAberporth places Wales at the heart of the growing UAV sector while the collaboration between the Welsh Assembly Government, IGER, QinetiQ and Boeing opens up a whole new world market for the civil application of UAV technology.

Wales' aerospace sector already employs 20,000 people and continues to grow and it is clear that aerospace and its related industries have a very strong future here."