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MDA Targets Program

On Sept. 13, a target missile supporting a planned intercept test for the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system experienced a malfunction shortly after it was launched and was destroyed by range safety officials at White Sands Missile Range, New Mexico. The THAAD interceptor missile was not launched and will be used for a future test.

Per standard procedure, an extensive review is taking place to determine the cause of the target failure, and this will take several weeks. The targets program at the Missile Defense Agency has been a model of success, with 86 target missiles launched since January, 2000. During this period there has been only one failure, and this occurred in 2001 during a target-only test due to a range communication issue.

Different targets are used for different interceptor systems. The Hera target launched on Sept. 13 was assembled by Coleman Research of Orlando, Florida, and consisted of surplus second and third stage rocket motors previously used for the U.S. Air Force's Minuteman II strategic missile, all of which have been retired from active service. It is extremely cost-effective to use surplus and retired rocket motors rather than buying new motors. Even though the rocket motors used for the most recent Hera launch were approximately 40 years old, they remain extremely reliable and have an excellent record of performance. The target failure which occurred this week has no impact on MDA's level of confidence regarding Coleman Research, Northrop Grumman or any of the other companies that make up the MDA targets team. The companies have all provided reliable and effective rocket motors for missile defense tests and will continue to do so.

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