ICESat Performs Flawlessly

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The Ball Aerospace-built Ice, Cloud and Land Elevation Satellite (ICESat), after being tuned by ground commands, has performed flawlessly since its launch on Jan. 12. As its name suggests, ICESat will measure ice sheet elevations at the Earth's poles during its planned five-year mission, helping scientists understand global warming. Scientists expect to begin reviewing data by early summer.

The laser altimeter is now pointed at the frozen expanse of Antarctica as ICESat makes a transcontinental crossing in 9.8 minutes. The satellite will soon take ice measurements at 23,000 locations along the way. By way of comparison, Sir Edmund Hillary needed 98 days to make the first comparable scientific crossing in 1958.

"ICESat has already achieved several milestones in its progress toward measuring the polar ice sheets," said Zubin Emsley, Ball Aerospace ICESat program manager.

As part of NASA's Earth Observing System, the primary role of ICESat is to quantify ice sheet growth or retreat. It was designed to answer questions concerning many related aspects of the Earth's climate system, include a global climate change and changes in sea level.

The Ball Commercial Platform 2000 built by Ball Aerospace for ICESat is specifically designed for remote sensing missions and was also used for the QuikSCAT and QuickBird missions. NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center designed and built the Geoscience Laser Altimeter System (GLAS) for ICESat.

Since its launch from California's Vandenberg Air Force Base, ICESat's central computer has called on one avionics unit after another to demonstrate its capabilities. According to Emsley, all units are functioning to their exacting specifications. After attaining calibration orbit through thruster firings, GLAS will be activated in early February. GLAS will determine the distance from the satellite to the Earth's surface and to intervening clouds and aerosols. It will do this by precisely measuring the time it takes for a short pulse of laser light to travel to the reflecting object and return to the satellite. To verify the precision of the measurements, a research airplane will make passes over the desert of White Sands, N.M., while ICESat passes 375 miles overhead. Photographs taken from the plane will indicate the laser spots, and the results will be used to calibrate the GLAS measurements.

Image available at: http://www.ball.com/aerospace/media/images/icesat.html

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SOURCE: Ball Aerospace & Technologies Corp.

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