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Author: Ms. Kerrie Dougherty
Powerhouse Museum, Australia, kerrie.dougherty@gmail.com

SPACEPORT DARWIN: A PROPOSED EQUATORIAL LAUNCH FACILITY FOR ELDO

Abstract

By the mid-1960s, the European Launcher Development Organisation (ELDO) had signalled its intention to concentrate on developing the capability to launch communication satellites to equatorial orbit. However, the Woomera Rocket Range being used by ELDO at that time for its Europa 1 launch vehicle tests was too far south in latitude to be a viable facility for equatorial launches. Consequently, ELDO commissioned five studies by different member nations (UK, France, the Netherlands, Germany and Australia) investigating the feasibility of proposals that had been put forward for an equatorial launch site.

Anxious to retain ELDO operations within Australia, the Weapons Research Establishment, which managed the Woomera Range, developed a proposal for an equatorial launch facility located near the northern city of Darwin. This modest, but potentially expandable base, would operate as an adjunct of the Woomera Range.

This paper will examine the ultimately unsuccessful proposal that was put forward by Australia to develop an ELDO geostationary launch facility. It will describe the proposed layout, facilities and operation of the spaceport, discuss the resulting consequences to Australia of the failure of the proposal and consider the legacy of the ELDO spaceport proposal in later plans for an equatorial launch facility in Australia.