Imagine you're a soldier on the ground in some Third World country. There's an unmanned “Fire Scout” helicopter flying overhead. You can't see it, but the machine in the sky is equipped with a sensor that can detect land mines, camouflaged vehicles and other targets.

The Fire Scout also has a laser beam that can lock on to one of those targets, lighting the way for a laser-guided missile to destroy it.

It's all part of a program at Northrop Grumman Corp. in Melbourne for the Army.

On Monday, the company announced that its work in Melbourne under the ASTAMIDS program -- short for Airborne Standoff Minefield Detection System -- is being expanded from $55 million to $81 million.

When the contract was awarded two years ago, it was worth $42 million for Northrop Grumman in Melbourne. It focused on developing the sensor for the Fire Scout for missions to detect mines.

Since then, the lasers have been added to the program.

And now the Army envisions using the helicopters for a variety of missions, Northrop Grumman spokesman Jim Stratford said.

The Army "found that the helicopters are capable of doing a lot more" than originally planned, Stratford added.

With revenues of more than $25 billion a year, Los Angeles-based Northrop Grumman is the world's second-largest defense company.

The Fire Scout is being produced by Northrop Grumman in San Diego. The sensors and lasers that will be mounted on the Fire Scout are being developed in Melbourne.

Stratford estimates the sensors and lasers will go into production in Melbourne in about two years, with the work being done at Northrop Grumman at Melbourne International Airport and DRS Technologies on Babcock Street.

Stratford said the system was not conceived strictly for the war in Iraq, but the system will have "some real applications in the current conflict."

Engineers and other personnel at Northrop Grumman in Melbourne have been working on the program, which still is in the development phase.

The contract hasn't created the need for additional jobs. Still, the work contributes to the company's overall "hiring mode" in Melbourne, where Northrop Grumman employs about 2,000 people, Stratford said.

Northrop Grumman in Melbourne is known for developing the J-STARS surveillance planes for the U.S. military. The planes use radar to spot moving objects on the ground through clouds, rain, snow and sandstorms.

The company's Melbourne facilities have produced the planes for the past nine years, but that work ended last month.

However, maintenance, testing and upgrades on the planes still will take place in Melbourne, Stratford said.


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