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Lawton factory to make platform to link 'notoriously fragmented' national defense systems



Richard Mize

The Oklahoman



Picogrid, a defense technology startup, said it has received \$12 million in financing for a factory in Lawton, its second, to build its unified platform for autonomous remote systems for military uses under a nearly \$1 billion Pentagon contract.

Picogrid, based in El Segundo, California, said its products create "an open ecosystem" of defense technology. The aim is to connect and remotely control sensors, drones, command interfaces, and other "notoriously fragmented" defense systems.

The Lawton factory, to be in operation in 2025, will focus on manufacturing Lander, Picogrid's flagship sensor platform. It will create a "substantial number" of jobs, Picogrid said in a press release, and coincides with execution of the contract, which was for \$950 million with the U.S. Air Force.

Picogrid plans to open the factory at FISTA Innovation Park, an emerging defense manufacturing hub near Fort Sill. The company raised its seed capital in a round led by Initialized Capital with participation by Starburst Ventures, Credo Ventures, Giant Step Capital, Domino Ventures, and Alumni Ventures.

The company said its technology is used on military bases across the United States and by the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense on the front lines of Russia's war in Ukraine.

**Picogrid started in New York University dorm rooms.
The pro-business climate got it to Oklahoma**



Picogrid founders Zane Mountcastle, 28, and Martin Slosarik, 29, started developing autonomous systems more than a decade ago while in college.

"We started making defense technology out of our dorm rooms at New York University," Slosarik said. "Due to our research activities at NYU, we became contractors for the U.S. Army Engineer Research and Development Center (ERDC) and the U.S. Navy Naval Facilities Engineering Systems Command (NAVFAC)."

With Picogrid's first factory in California, where Mountcastle and Slosarik live, why the second one in Oklahoma?

"We fell in love with Oklahoma and selected it for our second factory due to our Head of Government Solutions, retired U.S. Army Colonel Anthony Lugo, who spent 10-plus years of service in the Lawton-Fort Sill community," Slosarik told The Oklahoman.

Anthony Lugo, Picogrid's director of government solutions, added, "The conducive atmosphere in Lawton-Fort Sill and throughout the state is highly favorable for the growth and operations of our company."

Modern software, global impact from Picogrid in Lawton-Fort Sill, Oklahoma



Mountcastle said he and Slosarik saw a need to tie together essential systems.

"It was a gut punch as an engineer trained in modern software. Every sensor, plane, vehicle, and command center operates as an independent system with no way to work together," Mountcastle said.

He said Picogrid's technology helps integrate devices "that the military increasingly depends on, using modern hardware and software to route data to and from systems deployed all over the world."

Drones, self-operational vehicles, artificial intelligence work together



The tech is based on Legion, its cloud-based API – application programming interface – used to connect and control third-party autonomous systems. It includes drones, unmanned vehicles, and surveillance tools driven by artificial intelligence, "all working together in a cohesive and intelligent ecosystem."

Picogrid's platform "is a paradigm shift in defense operations, offering unprecedented levels of coordination and real-time intelligence," Mountcastle said. "It's not just about having the most sophisticated defense systems; it's about how these systems work together as a singular force."

"The integration of our most advanced defense systems is the difference between deterrence and vulnerability."

Picogrid to provide the Pentagon with what nearly \$1 billion will buy



Since launching in 2021, Picogrid has won more than a dozen federal contracts, including a nearly \$1 billion IDIQ contract from the Pentagon. IDIQ stands for "Indefinite Delivery, Indefinite Quantity." Under federal law, an IDIQ contract "provides for an indefinite quantity, within stated limits, of supplies or services during a fixed period."

The dark outlook and rising potential for global military conflict presents opportunity, said Kim-Mai Cutler, a partner at Initialized Capital.

"The Pentagon has made integration of major defense systems a big priority over the next few years as the risk of near-peer conflict grows year-over-year," Cutler said in a press release. "Picogrid is well-positioned to make sure that disparate vendors and technology providers can interface with each other to support U.S. and international security needs."

Krista Ratliff, president and CEO of FISTA (the manufacturing hub), expressed enthusiasm for Picogrid's work.

"We are excited about Picogrid's interest in joining FISTA. Their presence in Lawton Fort Sill promises newprofessional and educational opportunities for our community," she said.

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COLUMN: FISTA is a model for public-private innovation

- By Markwayne Mullin

As a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, it's my honor and responsibility to ensure Oklahoma's military installations and defense partners have what they need at the federal level to protect and serve our nation. What's equally important, however, are the investments our communities make within themselves to support America's warfighters and protect Oklahoma's future as a national defense hub.

One year ago this week, I joined with the Lawton community for the grand opening of the city's newest public-private partnership, the Fires Innovation Science and Technology Accelerator (FISTA) Innovation Park, where tomorrow's technology empowers the warfighter. Lawton Mayor Stan Booker, city leadership, Governor Kevin Stitt, and our federal delegation all took part in the unveiling of this historic, game-changing investment for the future of Lawton and Southwest Oklahoma.

Back in 2017 the U.S. Army began looking for ways to partner with entrepreneurs, innovators, and higher education institutions. The establishment of eight Cross-Functional Teams (CFTs), including Long-Range Precision Fires and Air and Missile Defense at Fort Sill helped focus DOD and industry efforts to identify and address gaps in transportation, munitions, and technology. Lawton took a seat at the table, knowing the future of U.S. Army modernization is integral to the survival of Lawton-Fort Sill.

What came out of those early partnerships was a need to leverage strategic collaborations to modernize our armed forces and strengthen military communities like Lawton. As our nation adapts from conventional to modern warfare, our defense needs have changed, and it's more important than ever that we adapt to the needs of today's warfighter.

The City of Lawton and Fort Sill are more than ready to meet this challenge and have created a model for how communities can evolve.

In just one year, FISTA is already paying dividends to our state and our national defense. They've created an environment where defense partners want to invest in Oklahoma, bringing high-paying jobs and bolstering future community development. In one year, FISTA has doubled their size—with 30,000 square feet currently under construction. Three of the top 10 leading defense contractors — Raytheon, Leidos, and Northrop — are proud to call FISTA home. Importantly, FISTA is on track to create 225 additional high-paying tech jobs within the next two years, and 275 additional service, retail and other ancillary service jobs which will benefit community and military family members. By conservative estimates, FISTA has generated \$50 million in local financial impact in the past 12 months.

Public-private partnerships like FISTA put Lawton at the center of advanced weaponry and engineering, which fuels recruiting and attracts desirable business from across the nation to Oklahoma's growing defense industrial base.

It's important to recognize that community support from Lawton has been integral to FISTA's year one success. The city has stepped up to establish educational partnerships and internships, educate residents, and secure state and federal buy-in. Lawton and FISTA are also working together with the DOD's SkillBridge Program to help America's veterans transition from military service to civilian employment.

FISTA has recently become an approved STEM partner with the city, which means that Lawton-Fort Sill is working directly with defense contractors at FISTA to ensure and local educational institutions and trade programs are meeting the needs of tomorrow's workforce. This partnership is vitally important for keeping family-sustaining jobs in Lawton.

Every high-tech company looking to invest in Lawton asks about the workforce pipeline, and I commend Lawton-Fort Sill for taking such a proactive role in meeting workforce needs and safeguarding Lawton's long-term economic future.

Mayor Stan Booker often says that innovation makes America stronger, and Lawton-Fort Sill's support of the U.S. Army's modernization is key for Lawton's long-term economic success. Mayor Booker is right, of course, because in Oklahoma, we know that what's good for our military installations is good for the communities that surround them. Nowhere is that more evident than here in Lawton-Fort Sill.

On this exciting one-year anniversary of the FISTA's opening, I want to congratulate the Lawton-Fort Sill community and FISTA for showing Oklahoma and our nation how public-private partnerships can be a model for supporting America's warfighters and protecting our military communities for generations to come.

U.S. Senator Markwayne Mullin (R-OK) is a successful business owner and working cow-calf rancher currently representing Oklahoma in the United States Senate. He is a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee.