
Space commerce said key to moon exploration

NASA officials say government needs to be trailblazer for companies

By Deborah Zabarenko

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WASHINGTON - Making money on the moon is an essential part of the U.S. plan for space exploration, NASA officials said on Friday after a four-day strategy workshop with international space officials and scientists.

Billed as the first meeting to determine what explorers would do if they return to the lunar surface after more than three decades, the gathering drew some 180 participants from more than a dozen countries, including China, Russia, Japan and the nations of the European Space Agency.

Shana Dale, NASA's deputy administrator, said one clear goal was to do business.

"The teams recognize the critical importance of space commerce — having real companies going to the moon and making money," Dale said at a telephone news conference. "The government needs to be a trailblazer and enabler (with) a desire to see commerce take off."

Other essentials for a global space strategy include public involvement and participation by international partners, Dale said.

The strategy workshop was the first of several scheduled for this year that aim to set out specific goals for future space missions to the moon and Mars, as described by President George W. Bush in 2004 in a sweeping "Vision for Space Exploration."

Delivered less than a year after the fatal 2003 shuttle Columbia accident, Bush called for a human return to the moon by 2020 and eventually a human flight to Mars.

Since the Columbia disaster, in which seven astronauts died, only one space shuttle has flown, and the shuttle fleet is to be retired by 2010.

A new Crew Exploration Vehicle meant to return humans to the lunar surface is still on the drawing board, and may not be ready until 2012 or later.

The last time humans went to the moon was aboard NASA's Apollo 17 in 1972. Since then, China has begun its own human space program and also sent representatives to this meeting, though Dale said they apparently did not attend the smaller working sessions.

Aside from the central issues of commerce, international cooperation and public engagement, the working groups also noted the need for lunar law early in the process.

David Beatty of NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory said an international legal framework would be helpful in the area of property rights, interoperability standards and making hardware from various countries work together.

Such laws could govern more prosaic issues as well, Laurie Lesin of NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center said.

"At our group, we did mention once briefly how we're going to decide which side of the road we drive on, on the moon," Lesin said with a laugh.

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