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NASA Ames satellite shoots into space, LCROSS will look for water on the moon

By Diana Samuels
Daily News Staff Writer
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The big screen at [NASA Ames'](#) Exploration Center in Mountain View showed the launch team in Florida in front of computers.

"Propulsion. Go... Engine shield. Go ... Flight control. Go."

A few minutes before launch Thursday, the room at [NASA Ames](#) hushed. People pulled out small video cameras and trained them on the screen. With 10 seconds left they chanted a countdown, and when the rocket rose into the sky they broke into loud cheers.

A couple hundred space aficionados of all ages had gathered with NASA Ames scientists to watch NASA's newest mission to the [moon](#) blast off. The Atlas V rocket that launched successfully from Cape Canaveral, Fla., at 2:32 p.m. Pacific time is carrying two satellites, including LCROSS — the Lunar Crater Observation and Sensing Satellite developed and operated by NASA [Ames Research Center](#).

LCROSS's mission is to look for water on the [moon](#). In October it will be sent crashing into one of the moon's shadowy craters on a lunar pole, and the satellite's sensors will look for traces of ice in the plume created by the crash.

If evidence of water is found, it will be a major indication humans might be able to someday live on the moon for extended periods of time, David Morrison, director of the NASA Lunar Science Institute, told the audience at NASA's launch event.

The other mission sent into space on the same rocket is the Lunar Reconnaissance Orbiter, which will map the moon's surface in extensive

detail.

It is NASA's first moon mission in a decade, and represents the agency's renewed interest in returning astronauts to its surface.

"It's not just any moon," Morrison said. "It's our moon. ... It's a window on our Earth, on the Earth's history and what's happening on the Earth today."

Morrison and other NASA scientists led attendees through an overview of the mission while they waited for the launch.

"We're all kind of nervous here," Morrison told the audience. "I'm supposed to try to entertain you while we're all sitting nervously waiting."

After the presentation, Mercedes Fleming and her 5-year-old son Nathaniel waited patiently.

"I never seen one lift off," Nathaniel said.

Nathaniel's dad Jake Burkart works at NASA Ames and talks about LCROSS often.

"We've been so involved in it over the years," Fleming said. "The culmination is really exciting, even though we're just family members."

The rocket's flight had been delayed a day already. There were three potential launch times on Thursday — 2:12 p.m., 2:22 p.m., 2:32 p.m. — and the first two were called off because of weather conditions. But at about 2:17, the green light for the final time went up and the rocket launched 15 minutes later.

Cameras mounted on the rocket provided stunning views looking down on Earth, showing the booster rockets shutting off as the clouds became smaller and smaller.

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Redwood Shores resident Joni Saxon brought her family, visiting from Colorado, to see the launch.

"I thought it was awesome," her 12-year-old grandson Alan Kopp said, "seeing it shoot up into the air so fast."

NASA Ames Director of Science Michael Bicy said he was "relieved and gratified" the launch was successful.

"Launches are sufficiently rare, any time you have one its gratifying and spine-tingling," Bicy said. "We don't take any of this for granted."

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