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NASA: Satellite slated to enter Moon's orbit on Tuesday

All is going according plan as two lunar satellites kick off next moon mission

By Sharon Gaudin

June 19, 2009 12:15 PM ET

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Computerworld - The day after blasting off, [NASA's two lunar satellites](#) are hurtling toward the moon.

NASA reported on its Web site that all is going according to plan and that its flight operations team established communication with both satellites -- the Lunar Reconnaissance Orbiter and the Lunar Crater Observation and Sensing Satellite -- hours after the launch on Tuesday afternoon.

Both satellites were perched atop an [Atlas V rocket](#) that took off from Cape Canaveral Air Force Station in Florida at 5:32 p.m. EDT on Thursday on a mission to help [NASA prepare](#) for its next human flight to the moon.

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The Lunar Reconnaissance Orbiter is expected to reach the moon at 5:43 a.m. EDT on Tuesday. It will then go into a low polar orbit about 31 miles above the moon's surface. It's expected to stay in that orbit for one year for its primary mission.

The Reconnaissance Orbiter is designed to use seven onboard instruments to create high-resolution, three-dimensional maps of the moon's surface. According to NASA, the satellite also will explore the moon's deepest craters, checking out permanently sunlit and shadowed regions, while also studying how the moon's radiation would affect humans.

"During the 60-day commissioning period, we will turn on spacecraft components and science instruments," said Cathy Peddie, a NASA deputy project manager, in a statement. "All instruments will be turned on within two weeks of launch, and we should start seeing the moon in new and greater detail within the next month."

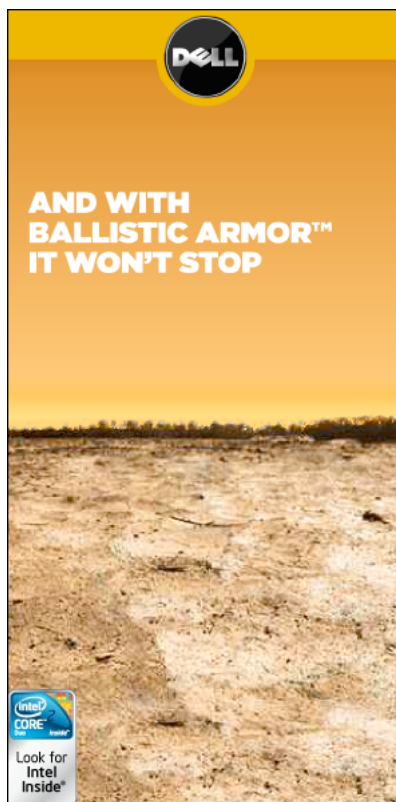
The second spacecraft, the Lunar Crater Observation and Sensing Satellite, will stay attached to its rocket for the next four months, NASA reported. This satellite will send an empty section of itself on a collision course with a lunar crater that is permanently in the shade. NASA scientists are hoping the impact will kick up surface material that scientists can study in an effort to find evidence of water.

Later on, the orbiter will send itself hurtling toward a collision with the moon.

NASA is hoping not only to return astronauts to the moon, but also to build a lunar outpost there by 2020. The plan includes the use of [next-generation robots](#) and machines to help prepare a landing area, as well as a base for humans to live once they arrive.

[NASA scientists are](#) hoping the two satellites can provide them with new information about the moon.

Whether NASA actually will go ahead with a human mission to the moon largely depends on the agency's budget.



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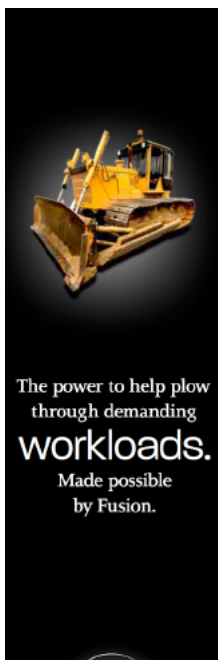
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Earlier this month, President [Barack Obama called](#) for an independent review of NASA's human space flight activities. Looking at possible alternatives to programs already in the pipeline, the review is geared toward making sure the country's human space flight program remains "safe, innovative and affordable" after the space shuttle is retired, NASA said.

The review began this week.

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