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Scouts to set stage on moon

With explorers en route, next step in spaceflight has begun

BY JAMES DEAN • FLORIDA TODAY • JUNE 19, 2009

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CAPE CANAVERAL -- NASA's plan to return astronauts to the moon got off the ground Thursday with the launch of two robotic scouts that will seek out lunar landing sites and evidence of water.

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A United Launch Alliance Atlas V rocket blasted off from Cape Canaveral Air Force Station at 5:32 p.m., the last of the day's three launch opportunities and 20 minutes later than planned because of a threatening thunderstorm to the west.

"We're really excited to be at this point," said Todd May, manager for NASA's Lunar Precursor Robotic Program. "We really felt like we threaded the needle on this one."

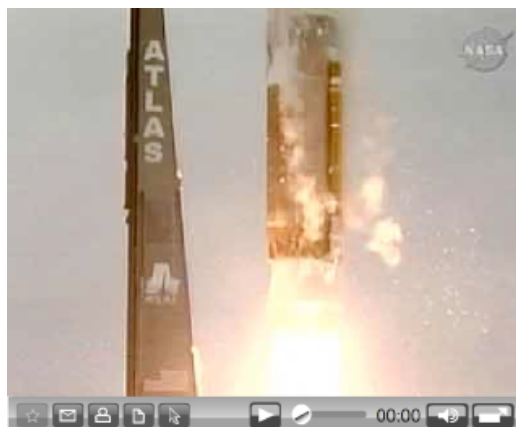
Atop the rocket was the Lunar Reconnaissance Orbiter, which will spend a year mapping the moon in the greatest detail yet and then likely will continue science observations for another two years.

A secondary payload, called the Lunar Crater Observation and Sensing Satellite, plans an October nosedive into a crater minutes behind the rocket's Centaur upper stage.

The launch of the \$590 million mission was delayed a day by shuttle Endeavour's second launch attempt Wednesday. Managers worried that additional weather delays could hurt their science goals.

The later the liftoff, the fewer U.S. ground observatories and amateur astronomers would be able to see the Centaur stage pancake into a permanently shadowed crater and the resulting debris plume.

NASA hopes the collision near the moon's south pole confirms the existence of frozen water trapped in the crater floors, available to support human



A United Launch Alliance Atlas V rocket launched from Cape Canaveral Air Force Station today. Video provided by NASA...



An Atlas V rocket lifts off from Cape Canaveral Air Force Station on Thursday. (Michael R. Brown, FLORIDA TODAY)

ON THE WEB The Flame Trench: Space team blog

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The impact, expected Oct. 9, should be visible west of the Mississippi River.

With less than 15 minutes before Thursday's liftoff would have to be scrubbed, an Air Force meteorologist announced that weather conditions had turned from "red" to "green."

The 19-story, bronze-and-white Atlas V rumbled aloft and quickly disappeared above a low layer of clouds.

Mission managers and scientists cheered about 45 minutes later, when the orbiter separated from the rocket's upper stage and began its roughly five-day voyage to reach lunar orbit.

NASA hopes to send astronauts to the moon as soon as 2020. But that goal and the design of the vehicles necessary to make it happen are under review by a presidential panel that met publicly for the first time Wednesday in Washington, D.C.

May said uncertainty hovering over the agency's exploration program didn't detract from the excitement surrounding the robotic missions.

"We're hoping that they see what we did today, that we're on our way," he said. "This is the first step in the next journey of space exploration. We're looking forward to getting started."

Contact Dean at 639-3644 or jdean@floridatoday.com.

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