

Astronauts to spacewalk for repair work

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NASA says space shuttle Discovery's astronauts will conduct a Wednesday spacewalk to fix two protruding pieces of fabric on the underside of the orbiter.

Shuttle Program Manager Wayne Hale Jr. said it will mark the first time astronauts will walk in space to repair a shuttle.

Hale said National Aeronautics and Space Administration engineers determined they could not guarantee the fabric would cause no harm when Discovery re-enters Earth's atmosphere at the end of its mission next week, the Los Angeles Times reported.

"At the end of the day, the bottom line is that there is large uncertainty because nobody has a very good handle on the aerodynamics at those altitudes and those speeds," Hale said. "The remedy is easy, so therefore we should exercise the remedy."

Discovery's astronauts have already spent more than 13 hours walking in space during the current mission, including more than seven hours Monday installing a 660-pound gyroscope on the International Space Station.

NASA was obviously thinking of the February 2003 destruction of the Columbia shuttle, which disintegrated upon reentry.

"This is the new NASA," Hale said Monday. "If safety could be a problem, "we won't go there."

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