

Space shuttle foam problem is studied

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The fate of the space shuttle program reportedly rests with engineers and scientists studying problems encountered during the recent Discovery mission.

The Discovery landed without incident Tuesday in California and scientists immediately starting work to determine why at least four sections of insulating foam came off the spacecraft's external fuel tank during launch.

National Aeronautics and Space Administration Director Michael Griffin has ordered a preliminary finding to be made public as early as Thursday. The research teams are composed of engineers from NASA and the Lockheed Martin Corp., which manufactured the fuel tank.

"This is the first step back in our return-to-flight sequence," Griffin said, adding the loss of the foam insulation was the only problem associated with the Discovery flight.

It was a piece of loose foam that caused the 2003 destruction of space shuttle Columbia, taking the lives of all seven crew members and resulting in a 2 1/2-year shuttle flight suspension.

Space shuttle Atlantis is scheduled for a September launch, but currently all shuttle flights are suspended until NASA learns what caused Discovery's foam problem -- an issue scientists had believed to have been resolved, the Post noted.

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