

NASA may use Hawaiian ash in Mars training

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Hawaii's stark volcanic landscape that once served as a training ground for lunar astronauts might soon be a resource for Mars training.

A Hawaiian company is seeking state permission to quarry an area between Mauna Loa and Mauna Kea to obtain purified volcanic ash for NASA to use in Mars training, the Honolulu Advertiser reported Friday.

When filtered, the ash is nearly identical to Martian dust, said Ron Terry of Geometrician Associates, who prepared a draft environmental assessment for the project.

"You can run a Mars Rover over it to see how it behaves and what kind of traction it gets, how the dust collects, how it obscures the optics, and how it interferes with the mechanics," Terry told the Advertiser. "It provides a pretty good simulation."

The company wants permission to remove up to 3,520 square yards of the surface soil to excavate the underlying ash to a depth of 2 to 3 feet. All the excavation work would be done by hand.

After being dried and processed, the final product would consist of up to 125 tons of refined and purified ash, Terry told the newspaper.

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