

Shuttle foam to be left off fuel tank

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The insulating foam on the space shuttle that broke loose during liftoff last July, will be removed from future launches, NASA officials said in Houston.

William H. Gerstenmaier, director of space operations, at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, said a large section of the foam that shielded pipes and cables on the shuttle's large external fuel tank would most likely not be used again, the New York Times reported Friday.

Engineers have long assumed the area, known as the PAL ramp, needs the insulating foam to protect equipment, but wind-tunnel tests and computer models indicate the foam is no longer necessary.

"The best thing to do is to just take it off," Gerstenmaier said in a telephone news conference from the Johnson Space Center in Houston.

NASA engineers had been surprised when a one-pound piece of foam broke free from the area despite years of efforts to eliminate or reduce foam shedding.

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