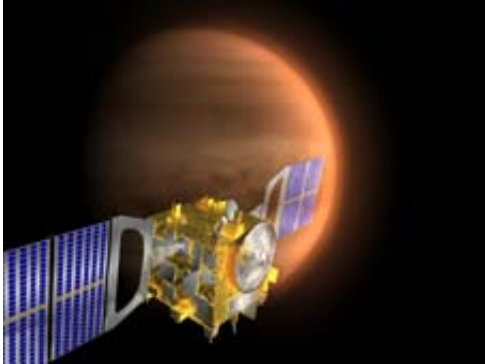


Venus Express spacecraft fires main engine

February 20 2006



One hundred days after its launch to Venus, the European Space Agency's Venus Express has successfully tested its main engine for the first time in space.

The main engine test was a critical step in the mission since that engine will be used to slow the spacecraft on its arrival at Venus and allow it to be captured in orbit around the planet.

The Paris-based ESA said the Feb. 16 test lasted about 3 seconds, allowing the spacecraft to change its velocity and point its high-gain antenna to Earth to communicate with ground control.

The next milestone is the Venus Orbit Insertion maneuver will occur April 11 when the main engine will fire for about 51 minutes, allowing

the spacecraft to counteract the pull of the sun and Venus and begin orbiting the planet, the ESA said.

Venus Express is more than 29 million miles from Earth.

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