

Scientists prepare for Mars experiments

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U.S. scientists are trying to determine the affect the Phoenix Mars Lander's descent will have on later soil experiments on the Red Planet.

Scheduled for an Aug. 3 launch, the \$414 million Phoenix Mars Lander is expected to touch down on Mars' northern plains, where vast stores of ice have been detected just below the surface. A robotic arm will scoop frozen soil and dump it into science instruments that will analyze its chemical content to see if it has the potential to sustain microbial life.

But scientists say gusting winds and exhaust plumes from the spacecraft's engines might complicate NASA's efforts to sample frozen soil on the surface of Mars.

University of Michigan Associate Professor of atmospheric science Nilton Renno and colleagues are trying to determine how much dust the Lander's 12 descent engines will create and whether Martian winds might interfere with efforts to collect soil samples.

The researchers are also testing the 8-foot robotic arm's ability to deliver soil samples from its scoop into onboard science instruments in the face of expected Martian winds.

The Lander's three-month main mission begins with its landing May 25, 2008.

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