

Ion engine to propel spacecraft to Mercury

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British space experts have been given the green light to start building a Star Trek-like engine for a Mercury-bound spacecraft.

The ion-powered BebiColumbo, which is set to leave Earth in 2013 for a six-year voyage to Mercury, will reach fuel efficiencies equal to 17.8 million miles per gallon, The Daily Telegraph reported Friday.

The hot planet has puzzled scientists because of its density in spite of being the planet closest in proximity to our solar system's sun.

Information gathered from the planetary investigation, which is being conducted by the European Space Agency and Astrium -- Europe's leading space enterprise-- is predicted to clarify ambiguity surrounding the configuration and pasts of Earth and other central planets.

"Ion propulsion will be a key technology for a series of future long-distance exploration missions. Today's agreement puts British scientists and engineers in a strong position in Europe to take a lead role in adopting these systems for future spacecraft," Astrium electro-propulsion specialist Howard Gray said.

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