

NASA aircraft to track Japanese spacecraft re-entry

June 10 2010

(AP) -- A NASA flying observatory has left California on a mission to track a [Japanese asteroid-sampling spacecraft](#) as it returns to Earth on a course for Australia.

NASA's Dryden Flight Research Center says its DC-8 airborne lab left Palmdale Tuesday evening, carrying scientists from the U.S. and Japanese space agencies and other organizations.

The group will study the meteor-like plunge of the Hyabusa [spacecraft](#), which visited the asteroid Itokawa during a seven-year mission and is carrying a capsule that may contain a sample from the space rock.

The spacecraft will break up, but the capsule is targeted to land in Australia's Woomera Prohibited Area at about 7 a.m. PDT Sunday.

Japanese controllers overcame major problems with Hyabusa's ion engines and a loss of communications to put the craft on a return course.

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