NASA invites public to send names on an asteroid mission and beyond

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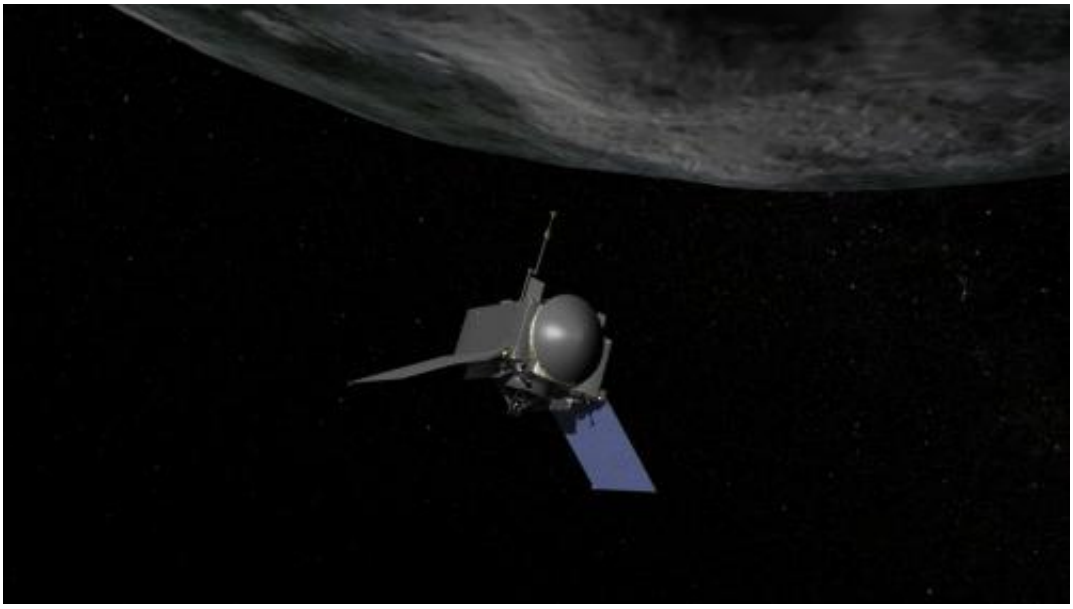

This is an artist's concept of NASA's OSIRIS-REx spacecraft preparing to take a sample from asteroid Bennu. Credit: NASA/Goddard/Chris Meaney

NASA is inviting people around the world to submit their names to be etched on a microchip aboard a spacecraft headed to the asteroid Bennu in 2016.

The "Messages to Bennu!" microchip will travel to the asteroid aboard the agency's Origins-Spectral Interpretation Resource Identification Security Regolith Explorer (OSIRIS-REx) spacecraft. The robotic

mission will spend more than two years at the 1,760-foot (500-meter)-wide asteroid. The spacecraft will collect a sample of Bennu's surface and return it to Earth in a sample return capsule.

"We're thrilled to be able to share the OSIRIS-REx adventure with people across the Earth, to Bennu and back," said Dante Lauretta, principal investigator of the OSIRIS-REx mission from the University of Arizona in Tucson. "It's a great opportunity for people to get engaged with the mission early and join us as we prepare for launch."

Those wishing to participate in "Messages to Bennu!" should submit their name online no later than Sept. 30 at: planetary.org/bennu

After a person submits their name, they will be able to download and print a certificate documenting their participation in the OSIRIS-REx mission.

"You'll be part of humankind's exploration of the solar system —How cool is that?" said Bill Nye, chief executive officer of The Planetary Society, the organization collecting and processing the entries.

Participants who "follow" or "like" the mission on Facebook will receive updates on the location of their name in space from launch time until the asteroid samples return to Earth in 2023. Facebook fans also will be kept apprised of mission progress and late-breaking news through regular status updates.

The OSIRIS-REx mission goal is to address basic questions about the composition of the very early solar system, the source of organic materials and water that made life possible on Earth, and to better predict the orbits of asteroids that represent collision threats to the Earth. It will collect a minimum of 2 ounces (60 grams) of surface material.

Once the sample return capsule deploys, the spacecraft will be placed into a long-term solar orbit around the sun, along with the microchip and every name on it.

"It is exciting to consider the possibility that some of the people who register to send their names to Bennu could one day be a part of the team that analyzes the samples from the asteroid 10 years from now," said Jason Dworkin, mission project scientist at NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center, Greenbelt, Md.

This mission will assist the agency in its efforts to identify the population of potentially hazardous near-Earth objects, as well as those suitable for asteroid exploration missions. The asteroid initiative brings together the best of NASA's science, technology and human exploration efforts to achieve President Obama's goal of sending humans to an asteroid by 2025.

NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center in Greenbelt, Md., will provide overall mission management, systems engineering, and safety and mission assurance for OSIRIS-REx. Lockheed Martin Space Systems in Denver will build the spacecraft. OSIRIS-REx is the third mission in NASA's New Frontiers Program. NASA's Marshall Space Flight Center in Huntsville, Ala., manages New Frontiers for the agency's Science Mission Directorate in Washington.

Provided by NASA