

House panel discusses Mars 2021 manned flyby mission

March 3 2014, by Bob Yirka



Mars. Image: NASA

(Phys.org) —The U.S. House of Representative's Science, Space and Technology Committee has met to discuss the virtues and possibility of asking NASA to assist a private foundation in conducting a manned spacecraft mission to the planet Mars in the 2021.

Nonprofit Inspiration Mars Foundation, led by Dennis Tito, the first [space tourist](#), originally planned to send two astronauts to Mars and land on the Red Planet in 2018. That idea has been scraped as the timeline was found to be too short. Instead, the foundation is now planning to send two astronauts (likely a [married couple](#)) on a flyby, in 2021. The years are chosen based on when the Earth and Mars are closest to one another.

To achieve that goal, the Foundation believes it needs help from NASA—specifically, they want a slightly different form of NASA's Orion spacecraft based on a design by Orbital Science's Corporation, with the addition of a front module for hosting solar panels. They'd also like the whole thing boosted into space by the Space Launch System, a big rocket that NASA is developing for several projects, one of which would ultimately be a trip to Mars.

Tito and his group have apparently convinced committee head Lamar Smith of the desirability of the plan as he testified at the meeting, suggesting that if the U.S. doesn't get to Mars in one of the near-window opportunities, China or Russia will likely get to the planet first. Other lawmakers at the meeting expressed skepticism of the short time frame while others suggested the cost of such a mission might be better spent on other projects.

Also at the meeting were experts in the field, many from NASA. Some supported the mission while others expressed reservations. NASA has plans of its own to get to Mars, but is looking at a longer timeframe. There are still issues to be worked out, such as how to protect astronauts from radiation during such a long mission (the Foundation's plan calls for a 501 day mission) and the development of support systems.

The committee didn't reach a consensus on the overall idea or the feasibility of the project, as it appears to be the first of many meetings—for its part, NASA itself has not commented on the proposal. For these reasons, it's not clear just yet if the Foundation's plan will be approved. It's likely many more details will have to be worked out before the idea can be seriously considered.

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