

Private lunar mission 'seeks US approval'

6 June 2016



Space startup Moon Express looks to embark on a mission to land a 20-pound (nine-kilo) package of scientific gear, including a telescope, on the moon sometime in the second half of 2017

The US government, in a first, is preparing to approve a private commercial space mission beyond the Earth's orbit, the Wall Street Journal has reported.

The expected decision would set precedents for how the US government would ensure that private ventures comply with international space treaties, the Journal reported late Sunday, citing unnamed sources familiar with the details.

Once the guidelines are set, the space startup Moon Express would embark on a mission to land a 20-pound (nine-kilo) package of scientific gear, including a telescope, on the moon sometime in the second half of 2017.

"We've been a regulatory pathfinder out of necessity," because up to now "only governments have undertaken space missions beyond Earth orbit," Moon Express CEO and founder Bob Richards told the Journal.

The approval, still months away, would pave the

way for several other for-profit space ventures.

These include plans to mine asteroids, track space debris, and billionaire Elon Musk's plan for an unmanned mission to Mars in 2018.

Moon Express is one of 16 companies competing for the Google Lunar X prize, which offers \$20 million (18 million euros) for the first team that can land a privately funded rover on the moon, have the rover travel at least 500 meters (547 yards), and transmit back to Earth high definition video and images.

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APA citation: Private lunar mission 'seeks US approval' (2016, June 6) retrieved 17 September 2021 from <https://phys.org/news/2016-06-private-venture-moon-mission.html>

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