

A&M researchers receive \$60,000 NASA grant

By Debbie Monroe
Reporter

NASA is paying two Texas A&M University researchers \$60,000 to find a better way to deal with a nasty problem.

Duncan Hitchens and Ramesh Kainthla, two Hydrogen Research Center biochemists who work under Dr. John Bockris, received a \$60,000 grant from the Johnson Space Center in early February to study the electrochemical processing of solid waste.

Hitchens says the space agency considers waste to be an expensive problem.

"They're going to spend a lot of money building a fourth shuttle, and

one of the aims of this is to facilitate a permanently manned space station," he says. "A lot of its (the shuttle's) time is going to be spent hauling this stuff back to Earth."

"They could put a lot more valuable staff and equipment in the same space."

The researchers believe that a recycling system can be built to turn the useless waste into something valuable. The system would break the material down into hydrogen and carbon dioxide by running an electric current through it.

"Hydrogen is extremely important in a spacecraft because it's burned in devices called fuel cells to produce electricity," Hitchens says.

"Carbon dioxide is pretty poisonous to humans, but there are ways of re-converting it to oxygen."

The scientists received their grant through the Texas Engineering Ex-

\$562,000 were funded by the Johnson Space Center.

Oran Nicks, director of the Space Research Center, says the grants allow scientists to put their minds to

"We've got students here learning new skills and working on new things," he says, "and I'd like to believe that some of the research we're doing will have an impact on society."

Nicks and his staff at the Space Research Center work to find A&M scientists interested in solving problems for NASA and commercial space companies. The research being done by Hitchens and Kainthla is part of a larger project which Nicks oversees.

The interdisciplinary research team includes representatives from biology, chemistry, agriculture, soil and crop science, and several engi-

neering disciplines. The group working to create an operational Closed Ecological Life Support System.

With a working CELSS system the space station or lunar base NASA wouldn't have to carry water and oxygen to space for the station, nor waste products from station to Earth.

"We haven't seen any space stations designed to use biological systems," Nicks says. "They (NASA) chemical and physical systems, well, but plants, or some form of biology, may be helpful."

Hitchens says it's a very difficult problem, but an exciting one.

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