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Friday, December 12, 2003

Shuttle wings to be embedded with new debris strike sensors

By Marcia Dunn
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

SPACE CENTER, Houston — Taking a lesson from the Columbia disaster, NASA plans to embed high-tech sensors in the wings of the three remaining space shuttles to detect any blows from debris, an oversight panel said Thursday.

The sensors will determine whether the leading edges of the wings were hit, but not the degree of damage, said Joseph Cuzzupoli, a Kistler Aerospace Corp. vice president who is part of the return-to-flight task force.

The extent of damage would still have to be determined by an inspection in orbit, using an extension boom equipped with cameras and lasers.

"It's just a tool that helps us to know and gives us a feeling that something hit it," said Cuzzupoli, who worked on both the Apollo and shuttle programs for the former Rockwell International.

Inspecting the outside of an orbiting shuttle will be difficult, Cuzzupoli said, and knowing where debris struck will save time and reduce risk of, say, banging the boom against the shuttle and damaging it.

The sensors have never been used on a shuttle before. They would detect blows from debris during launch and later in flight as well, Cuzzupoli said.

Cuzzupoli and other members of the NASA-appointed task force charged with overseeing return-to-flight activities held their second public meeting on Thursday.

They said NASA is making progress on all the recommendations put forth by the Columbia accident investigators. But they stressed the space agency is still developing a repair kit for the reinforced carbon panels that line the edges of the wings, and it is also struggling with the software needed for the inspection boom.

NASA's latest target for resuming shuttle flights is next fall. The independent task force was assembled by NASA last summer to help the space agency meet the Columbia investigators' recommendations for returning to flight.

The Columbia Accident Investigation Board determined that the disaster was caused by a piece of foam insulation that broke off the external fuel tank during liftoff last January and smashed into the leading edge of the shuttle's left wing.

Engineers did not know the shuttle had been hit by a chunk of foam until they reviewed footage of the launch a day later. No one had a clear idea of the severity of the damage before the spacecraft broke apart over Texas during re-entry on Feb. 1. All seven astronauts were killed.

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SOURCES: PetsMart; Petco; Super Pet; Company Web sites; Associated Press
S. Dooley, C. Kaeser, K. Taniguchi

NEWS IN BRIEF

Campaign finance law clears Supreme Court, but fight not over

WASHINGTON (AP) — The legal wrangling over campaign finance restrictions is far from over, despite the Supreme Court's endorsement of the broadest limits on campaign donations in nearly 30 years.

Justices invited opponents of the law to come back later with proof that parts of the new campaign law, as applied, are unconstitutional.

Unless there is a showing of harm, the divided court said Wednesday, the nation is better off with limits on the financial influence of deep-pocket donors even if money can never be divorced from politics.

The ruling means the restrictions put in place by Congress last year will apply to the 2004 election, including the first presidential delegate selection contests in Iowa and New Hampshire next month.

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