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A picture of the telescope used to detect Mars' two small moons
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Russians to Send Earth Organisms to Mars Moon

Phobos will be the target for Russia's space mission

If the Russian plan is successful, a launch this October could take colonies of resistant bacteria from Earth to one of Mars' moons and then back home, the RosCosmos agency announced recently. In addition to making the trip to Phobos, Mars' closest orbiting moon, the mission will also deploy a Chinese Yinghuo-1 (Firefly-1) sub-satellite in the Red Planet's orbit, in an attempt to find out exactly how the water on the planet disappeared all those years ago.

Phobos-Grunt, the next space mission, will also descend on the moon, where it will quickly proceed to collecting various soil samples from its landing site. After that, it will leave Phobos and head back home, a trip that is scheduled to end in July 2012, if all goes according to plan. Because the probe will not be equipped with the necessary equipment to sustain re-entry in Earth's atmosphere, like a heat shield, decelerator engines and other such apparatus, it will slingshot past our planet, catapulting the sample storage box in the process.

The box is to be later recovered by Russian authorities, which, in collaboration with The Planetary Society, will also analyze the transformation that the bacteria sent in deep-space will undergo. Experts at NASA and the Committee on Space Research of the International Council for Science (COSPAR) say that there is a risk of forward contamination attached to the mission, meaning that, if something should go wrong, organisms could reach Mars and adapt to the environment there, making all future research on life on Mars pointless.

Russian mission planners say that the possibility is very remote, and that the chances of that happening are minimal. And because the mission is in compliance with all norms set forth by COSPAR in international agreements, there is virtually no limit to the amount of bacteria the space mission could carry to Mars.

"I guess the most important thing I can say to 'allay concerns' is that...us and the Russians with whom we are working with are committed to observing the international protocols and agreements concerning planetary protection," said The Planetary Society Executive Director Lou Friedman, in an interview for Space.