

NewsRelease



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NASA ENGINEER HONORED IN OUT-OF-THIS-WORLD FASHION

Rarely on one's list of ambitions would appear an honor bestowed to a NASA Langley employee today. Mark Saunders, Director of the Exploration Systems and Space Operations Technology Directorate at NASA's Hampton, Va., field center, now has an unusual heir - an asteroid.

Dubbed (16105) Marksaunder, the "main belt" asteroid has a stable orbit between the orbits of Mars and Jupiter, about three times farther out from the sun than the orbit of Earth. Also known by its discovery designation 1999 VL2110, the asteroid was named for Saunders who was instrumental in the founding of NASA's Discovery Program. Established in April 1992, the Discovery Program provides frequent access to space for a wide range of planetary scientific investigations.

A change in the way the Agency does business, NASA's Discovery Program gives scientists opportunities now to not only participate in but to propose missions to investigate the planets and small bodies in the solar system. Saunders is credited with critical involvement in starting up the first three missions: the Near Earth Asteroid Rendezvous (NEAR) mission, the Lunar Prospector mission and Mars Pathfinder.

NASA's NEAR mission made many close up investigations of the asteroid Eros. Lunar Prospector found evidence of potential water ice near the poles of the moon. The most famous of the three, Mars Pathfinder introduced the rover Sojourner, the first "thinking" robot that accomplished revolutionary feats on the surface of the red planet.

Asteroids, also known as minor planets, are named by the International Astronomical Union (IAU). IAU rules require asteroids to be observed during four separate cycles around the Earth and sun before they become eligible for numbering and naming. Once its orbit has been determined, the discoverers can suggest a name. After a review by a committee, the IAU makes the name official, with a number in parentheses before the name.

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(16105) Marksaunders was discovered Nov. 14, 1999, by the Lowell Observatory Near-Earth Object Search at the Anderson Mesa Station. It can be found on the IAU list of names posted at:

<http://cfa-www.harvard.edu/iau/lists/MPNames.html>

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