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Mars Lander And Possibly Life Sites Eyed

From: Stig Agermose <stig.agermose@get2net.dk>
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Stig

Mars Lander Sites Eyed

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Scientists gathered at the University of Buffalo last week to choose a landing site for a planned 2001 Mars mission amid rumors that NASA budget cuts might scuttle the mission.

The Mars Surveyor 2001 Landing Site Workshop convened June 22-24 to select a range of potential targets, according to mission manager Dave Spencer of NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory.

According to Spencer, conference participants agreed on five categories for the 2001 landing: Mars' ancient highlands; layered deposits in the Valles Marineris (the so-called "Grand Canyon of Mars"); sites known to contain iron; ancient lakebeds; and ancient hydrothermal, or hot spring, regions.

The hot springs would be "everyone's top choice" because it would present the best candidate for possible evidence of past life, says Spencer. "Unfortunately, it's the only one of the five we haven't identified at any location."

He adds that an instrument aboard a Mars orbiter now en route to the planet might be able to pick out such a region later this year.

Meanwhile, the Mars Global Surveyor will take high resolution images of approximately 40 possible sites that fit the first four categories.

Spencer expects the primary landing site to be announced in January.

Three days before the conference began, a Planetary Society press alert said both the 2001 mission and a comet lander called Champollion had been canceled by NASA headquarters.

The Planetary Society is a nonprofit organization co-founded by the late Carl Sagan to promote planetary exploration.

"We heard a rumor," says Louis Friedman, the society's executive director. "There's no question that NASA has a budget problem,

but there's also no question that the public supports Mars exploration. We decided that public attention was needed to save the mission."

According to Friedman, the ploy worked, and NASA backed down on canceling the Mars mission, although he says the comet lander still faces the ax.

"There was conversation about it," says Spencer of the rumored cut. "But the scuttlebutt is that we're out of danger for the moment."

By Michael Ray Taylor, Discovery News Brief

Picture: Malin Space Science Systems/NASA

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