

NOW YOU HAVE IT, WHAT DO YOU DO WITH IT? A MISSION TO A RETURNED MARS SAMPLE.

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Introduction: Given the planned launch by NASA of a sample-caching rover in 2020, and with serious discussion by an international consortium of completing the Mars sample-return in subsequent launch opportunities, it is time to begin serious definition and development focused on the analysis, containment, and protection of that sample. Given the long lead times involved in providing for such a “mission,” it is imperative that preparations for handling a Mars sample begin soon.

NASA has long been committed to following the recommendations of the Space Studies Board (SSB) in its reports on sample handling and testing [1, 2], many of which are now reflected in the COSPAR Planetary Protection Policy [3]. In particular, the 1997 SSB study *Mars Sample Return: Issues and Recommendations* [1], recommended that: 1) “samples returned from Mars by spacecraft should be contained and treated as potentially hazardous until proven otherwise,” and 2) until “rigorous physical, chemical, and biological analyses confirm that there is no indication of the presence of any exogenous biological entity.”

“Testing” is Required: In the late 1990s the development of a protocol to support the analysis of the samples in a containment facility was begun by NASA in cooperation with CNES. The result was a “Draft Test Protocol” (DTP) that outlined requirements “for the safe receiving, handling, testing, distributing, and archiving of martian materials here on Earth” [4]. The DTP addressed, in a comprehensive fashion, aspects of sample handling and testing, as well as physical-chemical analyses and curation considerations for untested portions of the samples, to ensure that controlled distribution of the samples outside of containment could be accomplished after the requirements of the DTP are met.

Subsequent to the completion of the initial version of the DTP a stringent review and revision process took place, with a blue-ribbon review (Chaired by Joshua Lederberg of Rockefeller U. and Lynn Goldman of Johns Hopkins U.). After review and further revisions, the “Final” version of the DTP published in October 2002, represented a consensus understanding of what is required to meet planetary protection requirements for a Mars sample return mission. Among other things, the review of the DTP noted that there were aspects of Mars sample testing that would require dedicating portions of the sample to biohazard testing, as no amount of theoretical “analysis,” if unsupported by actual physical, chemical, and biological tests, would suffice—and even then, a strong case would need to be made with the regulatory agencies to tie tests on one portion of the sample to the safety of the remaining portions.

What Has Changed? There have been numerous improvements and updates to the study of biology and

extraterrestrial samples in the 15 years since it was published [e.g., 5], supported by several focused activities and studies that have occurred since the DTP was published [e.g., 6]. In particular, there has been an increased realization that a broad commonality exists between the physical and chemical analyses required to complete a biohazard and life-detection protocol and those necessary for an “early” characterization of returned martian samples. This has the potential to conserve a larger proportion of Mars material than would be possible if the two activities were not linked.

Now is the Time: The current notional timeline discussed by NASA for a Mars sample return mission could bring a sample back to Earth as early as 2029 [7]. Based on the recommendations of the DTP [4], and the SSB [1, 2] the planning for a Mars sample receiving facility (SRF) should therefore be started in 2018, or as stated in [2], “in the earliest phases of the Mars sample return mission.” Such planning can refresh and broaden the participant base, make specific improvements to the existing DTP, and update it to reflect current analytical and biological research, while including early science and opportunities, such as advanced robotics, for a more effective and less contaminating protocol execution.

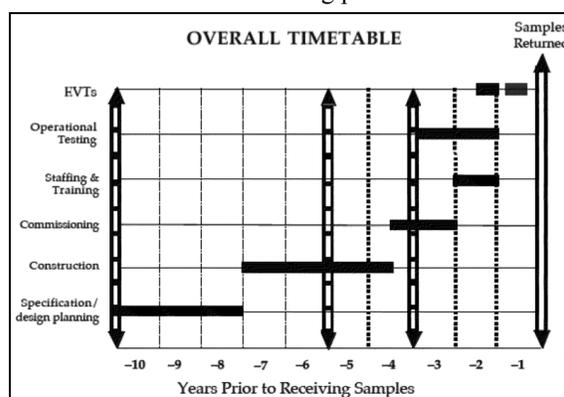


Fig. 1: A timetable for a Mars sample analysis “mission.”

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