

Press Release

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Second International Mars Sample Return Conference Mars a priority for CNES and French scientific community

Wednesday 25 April in Berlin, CNES Chief Operating Officer Lionel Suchet took part in the opening of the second International Mars Sample Return Conference. Ten years after the inaugural conference in Paris, co-hosted by ESA and CNES in cooperation with NASA and the International Mars Exploration Working Group (IMEWG), stakeholders in space exploration have come together for this three-day event to discuss the options for a possible international Mars sample return effort in the next decade.

CNES's participation in the U.S. Mars Science Laboratory, InSight and Mars 2020 missions is a testament to its solid expertise in Mars exploration. The agency is also working with Japan on the Hayabusa 2 mission set to put the MASCOT lander on asteroid Ryugu this autumn, and on MMX, which will depart to explore the red planet's moons in 2024. For Mars 2020, the rover plans to select and cache samples of Martian soil for return to Earth. The crucial step will be choosing samples to recover, where the SuperCam instrument supplied by France will be playing a key role.

CNES is closely involved in preparations for an international mission to return the first samples from Mars and France will be instrumental in analysing them through its internationally renowned science teams. Mars Sample Return will also entail rigorous planetary protection protocols, with secure and fair access to samples having to be ensured for scientists from all nations taking part. The next ESA Ministerial Conference at the end of 2019 will be a key milestone in establishing the roadmap for this international mission.

Mars Sample Return will be one of the most important solar system exploration missions ever undertaken. Mars may once have been habitable, but did it actually ever support life? Might traces of ancient lifeforms be awaiting discovery under the red planet's surface? Different types of samples from the most promising sites identified on Mars will try to answer these questions and tell us more about whether life could have formed beyond Earth.

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