

NASA: COLUMBIA CLEANUP COST NEARS \$400M

PAUL RECER, Associated Press

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WASHINGTON (AP) _ The investigation and cleanup of the space shuttle Columbia accident has cost the government almost \$400 million, NASA officials said Thursday.

The space agency spent \$18.7 million on direct costs of the Columbia Accident Investigation Board, the 13-member panel of outside experts who analyzed the Feb. 1 tragedy. That spending included transportation, the hiring of consultants and administrative costs such as printing of the 248-page report.

The National Aeronautics and Space Administration spent \$112.6 million in supporting the board's investigation. This included the elaborate foam-shooting experiments at the Southwest Research Center in San Antonio. The tests involved firing chunks of lightweight insulation at a high rate of speed from a gas cannon at a mock-up of the shuttle wing and heat shield.

The experiments showed that even flimsy insulation, if traveling fast enough and hitting just the right place, can break the reinforced carbon panels on the shuttle wing. One investigator said the experiment was the "smoking gun" of the board's search for the cause of the Columbia accident.

NASA spent \$21.1 million to help in the collection and assembly of some 84,000 pieces of Columbia recovered from the forests of East Texas and Louisiana. The Federal Emergency Management Administration spent at least an additional \$235 million, NASA Administrator Sean O'Keefe said Thursday.

The combined costs for the two federal agencies were at least \$387 million.

Columbia broke apart while returning to Earth, killing the seven astronauts on board. Pieces of the craft were scattered across hundreds of miles of Texas and Louisiana. More than 14,000 federal and state workers and volunteers walked almost shoulder to shoulder through forests and swamps in search of space shuttle pieces. Divers combed the bottom of Texas lakes and helicopters searched from the air.

Altogether, the search recovered 38 percent of the dry weight of the space shuttle. The findings included some body parts of the seven astronauts who were killed. Searchers also found an on-board data recorder that provided critical information for the board's investigators.

NASA is now in the process of making repairs to the space shuttle fleet and the engineering and procedure changes in the shuttle program management that were recommended by the board.

O'Keefe said that the final expense of these changes is still not certain because engineers are still considering a range of redesign options that will affect cost.

O'Keefe was asked at a news conference Thursday if the final cost of the Columbia accident recovery, including the changes needed to return the shuttles to orbit, would be less than \$1 billion. "I can't imagine it will be a number that will approach that," he replied.

But he said the actual figure is still unknown.

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