

Yomiuri: New Hope for Return of Hayabusa Space Probe

Courtesy of The Daily Yomiuri Online in English 1842 GMT 11 Feb 09

The troubled Hayabusa space probe, which landed on the asteroid Itokawa, has managed to activate its main engine after 16 months, the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency announced.

Scientists had previously given up hope that the probe would be able to return to Earth after taking off from the asteroid in November 2005 due to fuel leaks and a series of equipment problems on the space probe.

However, attitude control was achieved by utilizing solar radiation pressure, and Hayabusa entered the final stage of its return trip with the engine restart.

Hayabusa was launched in May 2003. Of three attitude control systems, two failed when the probe tried to collect rocks from the surface of Itokawa in November 2005. JAXA plotted a new flight plan to enable Hayabusa to return to Earth using those controls that still function.

The new course requires Hayabusa to travel 4.5 billion kilometers in total until its presumed return in June 2010, three years later than originally planned.

Hayabusa is now 300 million kilometers from Earth.