

# Dissenters rally against upcoming probe launch

Cassini protesters fear NASA and the government are lying about the risks

By Marcia Dunn  
The Associated Press

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. — A frighteningly poisonous substance contained in a box in a box, it's been bombarded by explosions and shrapnel, torched by burning fuel, slammed against steel and concrete and drenched in sea water.

And after years of the most severe testing possible, the Energy Department says the shielded plutonium for NASA's soon-to-be-launched Saturn probe, Cassini, is almost indestructible.

Not completely indestructible. Almost.

Not impossible to burst and leak. Nearly impossible.

"Impossible is not something you can say here," said Beverly Cook, the Energy Department's program director for plutonium power systems.

"The worst that can happen is a 1 mile-in-diameter asteroid could hit Florida right when we hit the launch button. That's not impossible. But I don't think anybody is worrying about an asteroid when we launch Cassini."

Asteroids aside, Cassini is safe whether the rocket blows or not, Cook and other government officials say. Any release of plutonium would be minute, they insist.

But in a scene straight out of a conspiracy thriller, anti-nuclear activists, pacifists and even a retired NASA safety officer have joined forces to expose what they believe are government lies. They want to stop Cassini's Oct. 13 launch, which they fear could kill or maim thousands.

It's the biggest, loudest crusade against a nuclear-powered space shot ever. Then again, it's the most plutonium for a space shot ever — 72 pounds of the highly radioactive, highly carcinogenic stuff, compressed into a nonpulverizing ceramic form so it cannot be inhaled in the event of a launch accident.

By mail, by phone, by rally and especially by Internet, the anti-Cassini crowd is gaining attention, if not momentum, as the launch date nears. A march near the launch site Saturday drew an estimated 500 protesters.

The result: plutonium pandemonium.

"Can man build something that's indestructible, in the fury and fire of a launch explosion?" asked Alan Kohn, an emergency preparedness operations officer for NASA during two plutonium-powered interplanetary launches several years ago.

Feeling guilty and being retired, he now sides with the opposition.

"You're going by faith — not faith in God, faith in man," the new Kohn said.

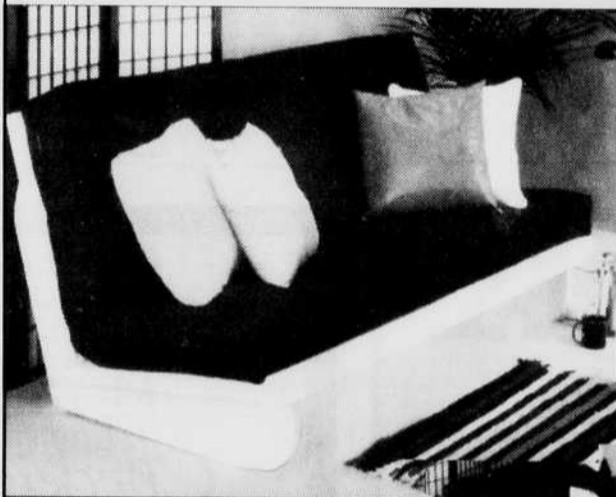
The Jet Propulsion Laboratory's Richard Spehalski, Cassini program manager, contends Kohn and others like him are spreading fear, not facts.

"Their techniques are very much like walking into a crowded movie theater and yelling, 'Fire!'" Spehalski said.

The plutonium 238 dioxide supplies electricity for Cassini's instruments during the 11-year, \$3.4 billion mission to explore Saturn and its enchanting rings and icy moons. The trip to the sixth planet from the sun will take seven years, cover 2.2 billion miles and require gravity-assisted flybys of Venus, Earth and Jupiter.

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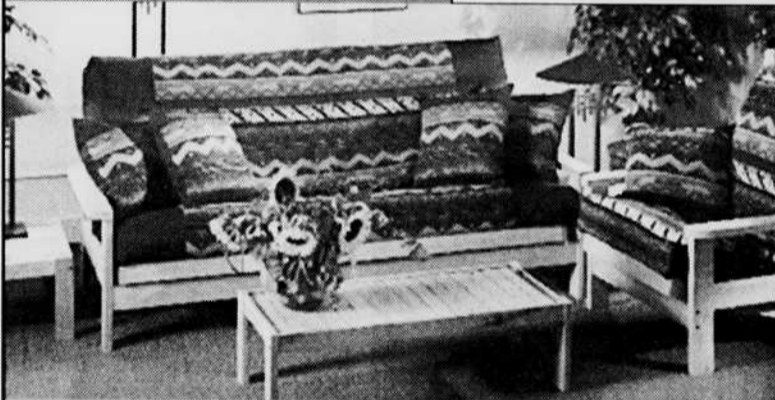
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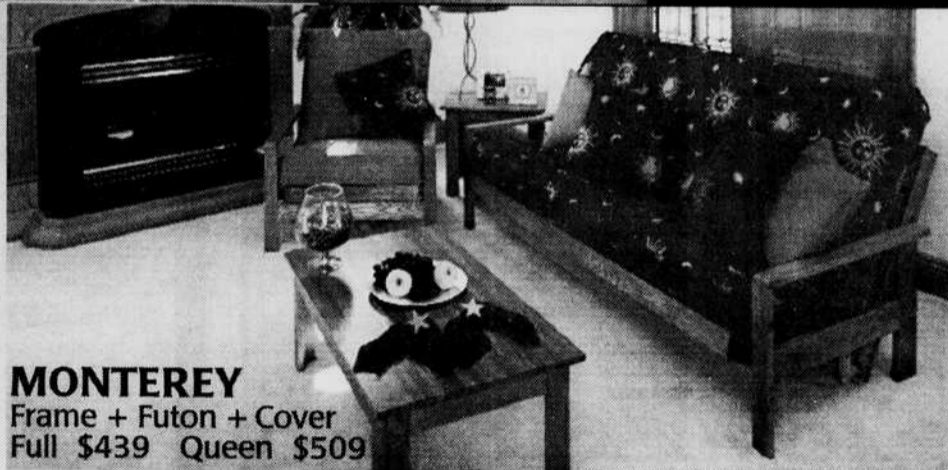
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