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MSU robot moon-digger wins NASA competition

The 120-pound, 5-foot-tall robot was designed last fall by eight students from three MSU engineering departments. It was built and tested on campus over the past year.

By **MICHAEL BECKER**
Chronicle Staff Writer

A robot moon-digger designed by Montana State University engineering students bested 21 other robots in a competition at Kennedy Space Center on Friday, earning the student team $5,000 and an invitation to a NASA rocket launch.

The Lunar Regolith Excavator Student Competition was held at the Astronaut Hall of Fame in Florida on Thursday and Friday and featured teams from universities around the country.

The goal: to see which student-designed and built, remote-controlled robot could pick up the most simulated moon dust.

The MSU robot, dubbed Montana MULE, picked up about 22 kilograms of dust — roughly 45 pounds. The MSU robot was the only one at the competition to meet NASA's 10-kilogram minimum, said the team's faculty adviser, MSU professor Brock LaMeres.

"They're freaking out. It's incredible," he said. "We went third, so we'd been sitting here for I don't know how long, six hours, waiting while other teams went."

The 120-pound, 5-foot-tall robot was designed last fall by eight students from three MSU engineering departments. It was built and tested on campus over the past year.

The students will split the $5,000 prize and will get V.I.P. seating at a future NASA launch, LaMeres said.

The competition was intended as part of an effort to keep university students around the country enrolled in science, engineering and mathematics courses, according to the its website. NASA also hopes that the students will come up with innovative ideas that could be used on future moon missions.

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