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Guanacaste, Costa Rica

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Friday, July 13, 2007

Franklin Goes Postal Over Plasma Rocket

By Britton Jacob-Schram

It appears as though the innovative plasma propulsion rocket devised by Costa Rican national hero and former NASA astronaut, Dr Franklin Chang Díaz, will be taking flight sooner than expected.

Via air mail, that is.

It's not the first time something having to do with Dr Chang has flown around the world licked-and-sticked to postcards, envelopes, and packages — about four years ago, the rocket scientist's portrait graced a special stamp alongside the Phanaeus changdiazii beetle, which was named after him.

It is, however, the first time the postal service, Correos de Costa Rica, has paid homage — in 160,000 mail-able ways — to the work of his Liberia-based, NASA-contracted Ad Astra Rocket Company.

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"I think it's a big motivation for our team, but also a big responsibility,

which we're taking up with a lot of optimism....just like many other Costa Ricans' work, we're bringing more publicity to our country," said Ad Astra Mechanical Engineer Jorge Oguilve.

The team's next goal is no small feat: by the end of the year, NASA and Dr Chang --- who spends half his time in Guanacaste, and half in Houston keeping an eye on other aspects of the rocket's progress --- are hoping to unveil a prototype of a plasma-propelled rocket engine. And on the goal-roster three years from now: the rocket's first flight into space.

The stamp with the purplish, gooey-substance (second on right) is the plasma the team works to contain. Magnetic fields are fired up, creating an invisible container — the plasma, which harnesses energy by reaching temperatures of the Sun, never comes into contact with the rocket's components.

Conventional rockets blow off all their thrust on liftoff, coasting to their destination. Plasma technology will allow the rocket to accelerate in space, cutting travel time to Mars, for instance, from 10 months to 39 days.

