Britain to set up new space agency

(Reuters) - Britain will set up a new space agency next month to exploit an industry that appears to have defied the recession and shows huge potential for growth, the government said on Tuesday.

The UK Space Agency will oversee the development of satellites, robotics and other advanced technology and may one day join international missions to explore Mars, the Moon and asteroids.

Britain's space and satellite sector employs 68,000 people and contributes 6 billion pounds ($9 billion) a year to the economy, the government says. It has grown in real terms by around nine percent a year since 1999, more than three times faster than the economy as a whole.

"Britain's space industry has defied the recession," Science and Innovation Minister Paul Drayson said. "It can grow to 40 billion pounds a year and create 100,000 jobs in 20 years."

Britain's space industry has traditionally focused on satellites and robotics rather than manned space flight.

However, Britain supports a European Space Agency mission that aims to send humans to Mars by the middle of this century in what would be the most ambitious endeavor in the history of space exploration.

British scientists worked on the Apollo Moon missions and a handful of Britons have flown in space.

Based in the town of Swindon, the new agency will assume responsibility for a sector previously handled by six government departments, two research councils, a technology committee and the Met Office. Its official launch is on April 1.

A new space innovation center will be set up in Harwell, Oxfordshire, on the site of a research park that was the birthplace of Britain's nuclear industry after World War Two.

The ruling Labour Party, trailing in the opinion polls before an election expected in May, hopes that technology and advanced engineering will help to fuel the economic recovery.

Earlier this week, the government announced hundreds of millions of pounds in aid for Ford and Nissan to develop low carbon cars in Britain.

Business Secretary Peter Mandelson said the space sector was "one of Britain's real success stories," creating jobs even during the worst recession on record.

"This is exactly the kind of high value-added industry we need to support as we rebalance our economy," he said.

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