

'One giant leap' toward a NASA Armstrong center?

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LOS ANGELES (AP) — Neil Armstrong's name is attached to a lunar crater, an asteroid, more than a dozen schools and a museum, but not a single NASA facility is christened in honor of the man whose "giant leap" made him the first to walk on the moon.

All that could soon change on the fringes of the Mojave Desert, where leaders at the space agency's top flight research center are mulling the consequences of a proposed name change at the place where Armstrong was a test pilot.

The push by some in Congress to strike the name of former NASA executive Hugh Dryden from the facility has brought with it some questions: Is it justified to substitute one accomplished figure for another? At a time of squeezed budgets, is it worth the cost? And, besides: How long before the next space hotshot upends the world's first moonwalker?

Managers at the Dryden Flight Research Center have no say in what they're called — final approval rests with the U.S. House and Senate — and so they have left the soul-searching to others.

"I'm happy with the name Dryden Flight Research Center, but I'll be equally happy with Armstrong," center Director David McBride said. "Both men were leaders in the field."

Though not a done deal, brainstorming is already underway: Welcome signs bearing

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the Dryden logo would have to be updated. Research aircraft would need their sides repainted. Letterhead and pamphlets would have to be recycled. And then there's the obligatory dedication ceremony.

Dryden officials have not calculated a total makeover cost but don't foresee extra funds, meaning they would have to work within their \$65 million operating budget to pay for the changes.

It wouldn't be the first rebranding of a NASA facility.

In 1999, the Lewis Research Center in Ohio — named for George Lewis, the first executive officer of NASA's predecessor agency — was changed to the John H. Glenn Research Center, after the first American to orbit Earth and former senator. A daylong celebration was held, complete with an F-16 flyover and a parade filled with floats, marching bands and a cameo appearance by Glenn.

Any festivities marking a Dryden-to-Armstrong swap would likely be more muted to save money.

A name switch often occurs to raise a center's profile and is not unlike what happens at universities, which shuffle the nameplate on buildings and stadiums as memories fade and institutions try to cash in on a bigger celebrity or generous donor.

"Dryden had a tremendous influence on the original space program," said American University space policy professor Howard McCurdy. Still, he added: "With few exceptions, time diminishes everyone's legacy."

The Dryden moniker has existed since 1976. Before that the center, located on the grounds of Edwards Air Force Base about 90 miles north of Los Angeles, was not named for a specific person. It was here where the sound barrier was broken and where the now-retired space shuttle fleet once landed. Experimental jets routinely buzz the skies.

Between 1955 and 1962, Armstrong was a test pilot at the facility — then called the High-Speed Flight Station. He logged 2,400 hours of flight there, including on the X-15 rocketplane that opened the way for manned spaceflight.

Less of a household name, Dryden was a child prodigy who enrolled in college at age 14. An aerospace engineer, he served as director of the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics, the predecessor to NASA, and later as the space agency's first deputy administrator. He died in 1965; four years later, Armstrong stepped on the moon.

After the House in late February voted unanimously for a Neil A. Armstrong Flight Research Center, Dryden officials started a checklist of signs that would need replacing on buildings, highway exits and aircraft. This is the second attempt at a name change by Republican Rep. Kevin McCarthy, whose district includes Dryden. The measure is awaiting consideration in the Senate, which failed to act last year.

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Some in Congress have questioned the idea, given the fiscal climate.

"I doubt in this era of declining funding for NASA that either Neil Armstrong or Hugh Dryden would want a single precious dollar to be spent on a cosmetic facility name change when that money could be spent instead on fulfilling NASA's mission to reach for the stars," Rep. Donna Edwards, D-Maryland, said during the bill's debate. Edwards nonetheless voted for bill.

The Glenn Center spent about \$260,000 on a new website, fresh signs and updated printed materials. To cut down on costs, employees were encouraged to use up the old letterhead when communicating with one another.

At Dryden, McBride said the metal entrance sign greeting visitors would be replaced immediately if the name change gets final approval, while other signs would have to wait. Most research aircraft would be rebranded as they come up for maintenance, except for the few that make frequent cross-country trips.

Graphic artists have yet to envision what an Armstrong logo would look like.

The thought of being affiliated with the Apollo 11 astronaut, who died last year, has excited area business owners, who believe the change could help them better promote the region to visitors.

"Neil Armstrong is much more recognizable. No disrespect to Mr. Dryden," said Kimberly Maevers, who heads the Greater Antelope Valley Economic Alliance.

Some NASA facilities have been named after political figures — John F. Kennedy Space Center in Florida, Lyndon B. Johnson Space Center in Texas, George C. Marshall Space Flight Center in Alabama — or players who have made significant contributions. For example, the Goddard Space Flight Center in Maryland was named for Robert Goddard, a physicist and inventor.

Meanwhile, the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in California, known for its robotic missions to Mars and the outer solar system, is not named for anyone.

The Dryden name wouldn't disappear entirely if the change goes through. The proposal calls for designating the center's test range in his honor as a consolation.

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