



Massive asteroid could be bound for Earth in 2036

12:00 AM CDT on Monday, May 15, 2006

The Orlando Sentinel

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. – Mark your calendar for Sunday, April 13, 2036. That's when a 1,000-foot-wide asteroid named Apophis could hit Earth with enough force to obliterate a state.

The odds of a collision are 1 in 6,250. But while that's a long shot at the racetrack, the stakes are too high for astronomers to ignore.

For now, Apophis represents the most imminent threat from the worst type of natural disaster known, one reason NASA is spending millions to detect the threat from asteroids.

A direct hit on an urban area could unleash more destruction than Hurricane Katrina, the 2004 Asian tsunami and the 1906 San Francisco earthquake combined. The blast would equal 880 million tons of TNT, or 65,000 times the power of the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima.

Objects this size are thought to hit Earth once every 1,000 years.

"Now, many people are aware this is something we can actually deal with, mitigate and defend against," said David Morrison of NASA's Ames Research Center in Mountain View, Calif.

In 1998, lawmakers formally directed NASA to identify by 2008 at least 90 percent of the asteroids more than a kilometer (0.6 mile) wide that orbit the sun and periodically cross Earth's path.

Last year, Congress told the agency to come up with options for deflecting potential threats. Ideas seriously discussed include lasers on the moon, futuristic "gravity tractors," spacecraft that ram incoming objects and nuclear weapons.

Few outside scientific circles took the threat seriously until 1980. Then, Luis and Walter Alvarez published a study based on geologic evidence that concluded a cataclysmic asteroid or comet impact 65 million years ago caused the extinction of two-thirds of plant and animal life on Earth – including the dinosaurs.

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