NASA approves $5 million for Hawaii asteroid detection project

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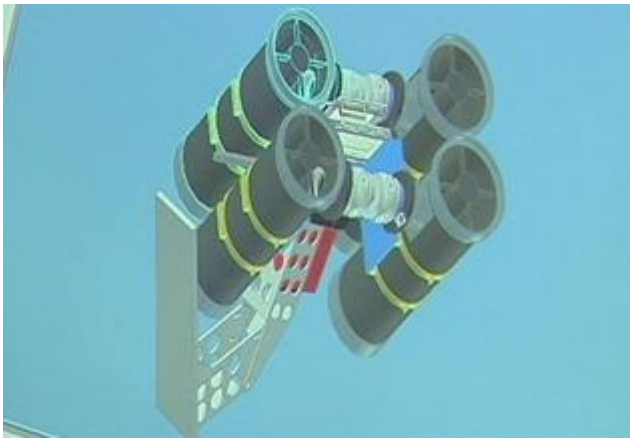

Meteors are entering the Earth's atmosphere all the time, in the form of what we know as shooting stars. But Friday's meteor over Russia was a little too large and too close for comfort.

"The shooting stars that you see in the sky are caused by tiny bits of space debris about the size of a grain of sand, so compared to that yes, a 40-foot space dome is ginormous," Bishop Museum Education Director Mike Shanahan said.

Scientists say meteors that size fall to earth about once a year. We just don't always see them.

While they don't usually cause widespread destruction, they're still a concern.

"It struck me that there was this kind of hole, that this imminent impacter risk is real and it comes from very small things," said Dr. John Tonry, Professor at the University of Hawaii Institute for Astronomy.

"As these observation methods get more precise, we'll get more and more ability to catch the smaller and smaller space rocks before they surprise us," Shanahan said.

Which is exactly what Dr. Tonry's Asteroid Terrestrial-impact Last Alert System would do.

"It's gonna involve small telescopes about the size of a good garbage can, but very wide fields of view and the intent is to basically scan the whole sky a couple times a night and that makes it impossible for things to sneak through," Dr. Tonry said.

The $5 million ATLAS project recently received funding from NASA and will be able to detect exactly when and where a meteor would hit.

"We can say it will be exactly such and so a position to within a mile and it'll happen at exactly such and such a time within a second," Dr. Tonry said.

This, all happening right here in the middle of the Pacific.

"We have some of the best research in the world being done right here in the Hawaiian islands," Dr. Tonry said.

Dr. Tonry says that if ATLAS were up and running before the arrival of the meteor over Russia, it could have provided about a day's warning.