



Activities of the Comet Interceptor Comet Environment and Target Identification Working Groups

Elena Martellato¹, Geraint H. Jones², Colin Snodgrass³, Seiji Sugita⁴, Charlotte Götz⁵, Aurelie Guilbert-Lepoutre⁶, Jean-Baptiste Vincent⁷, Raphael Marschall⁸, and Michael Küppers⁹

¹INAF-OAPD, Padua, Italy (elena.martellato@inaf.it)

²University College London, UK

³University of Edinburgh, UK

⁴University of Tokyo, Japan

⁵Northumbria University, UK

⁶CNRS/University of Lyon, France

⁷DLR Institute of Planetary Research, Germany

⁸CNRS Observatoire de la Côte d'Azur, France

⁹ESA/ESAC, Villanueva de la Cañada, Spain

Introduction: Comet Interceptor [1] is a joint space mission of the European Space Agency (ESA) and the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA). Its primary goals are to provide the first-ever in-situ characterisation of a long period comet (LPC), which could be a dynamically-new comet or an interstellar object, and to perform the first simultaneous multi-point exploration of a cometary coma and nucleus.

Comet Interceptor is the first rapid response mission [2]. The mission will be launched in 2029 on Ariane 6 (together with the Atmospheric Remote-sensing Infrared Exoplanet Large-survey (ARIEL) mission) towards the Sun-Earth Lagrange point L2, where it will wait for its target comet to appear.

Comet Interceptor consists of one main spacecraft (S/C A), and two deployable probes, named Probe B1 and Probe B2, which are provided by JAXA and ESA, respectively, allowing multipoint investigations of the target. The payload covers remote sensing and in situ observations of the selected object during the fly-by.

Science Objectives: The mission will investigate the processes of planetesimal formation by evaluating which of the phenomena observed by previous missions, particularly during the rendezvous of Rosetta with Comet 67P, are primordial and which have developed during the many perihelion passages of those SPCs. Specifically, the objectives of Comet Interceptor are:

- 1) *Comet Nucleus Science:* What is the surface composition, shape, morphology, and structure of the target object?
- 2) *Comet Environment Science:* What is the composition of the coma, its connection to the nucleus (activity) and the nature of its interaction with the solar wind?

Science Activities: The search for the target comet is underway, and preparations are being made

for the scientific exploitation of the data from the mission's three spacecraft.

The selection and scientific investigations of the target comet, as well as the development of the mission instruments and science operation areas, are supported by Working Groups (WGs). These are the Target Identification WG and Comet Environment WG. The latter comprises three sub-WGs, covering the Comet Nucleus, Near-Environment (inner dust and gas coma), and Far-Environment (outer dust and gas coma and tails). The specific tasks of the Comet Environment WG are to develop and provide results from scientific models addressing questions relevant to the implementation and operation of the mission and to achieve its scientific objectives.

Here, we provide a brief overview of the mission, and present and describe the aims and activities of the working groups. One of the recent activities of all the Comet Environment sub-working groups is the preparation of a large repository of numerical models to favour the successful planning for scientific operation and investigation. Other activities include the analysis of available data to better understand the environment expected during the encounter and establish base line parameters for target selection. The potential comets to encounter are currently under evaluation, and preparations are being made for the scientific exploitation of the data from the mission's three spacecraft.

References: [1] Jones, G.H. et al. (2024) *Space Sci. Rev.* 220, 9. [2] Snodgrass, C. & Jones, G.H. (2019) *Nat. Comm.* 10, 5418.