

Spent rocket lights sky

SALT LAKE CITY (AP) — A fiery object that lit up the Western sky and broke apart in a spectacular display over Idaho was a falling booster rocket from a Soviet satellite, the United States military says.

There were no reports that the spent rocket, which some witnesses said made a humming sound as it passed through the air Tuesday night, had hit the ground, said Col. Fred Watkins of the North American Air Defense Command Post at Colorado Springs, Colo. He said any remnants would not be radioactive.

The rocket was sighted from as far north as the Canadian border south to Las Vegas and from the Dakotas to Seattle, officials said.

Callers jammed the switchboards of law enforcement agencies, newspapers and television stations in Utah and Idaho after the object appeared in the clear sky shortly after 9 p.m. MST.

It was "so beautiful, yet frightening in a fantastic sort of way," said Beverly McCarthy, who said she was driving in Salt Lake City when she saw it. "It looked like a Fourth of July rocket."

Watkins identified the object as the rocket that propelled Cosmos 1338 into orbit Feb. 16 from the Soviet Union. He said the burned-out rocket's orbit around Earth had been "decaying" ever since.

Several observers in the southeastern Idaho town of Montpelier reported that debris from the flaming object appeared to fall to the ground in that area, Police Officer Shirley Long said early Wednesday.

She said officers were searching for evidence of the object in an area she declined to identify.

Watkins said if any remains reached the ground they would be strewn over about 1,000 miles and would be virtually undetectable.