

# Huge fireball was Russian rocket

(UPI) — A giant fireball that streaked across the Western sky and startled people from New Mexico to California was probably the remains of a rocket the Soviets used to launch a communications satellite in September, authorities said.

The North American Air Defense Command in Colorado Springs, Colo., said the center had predicted the re-entry of a

rocket body that was launched from the Soviet Union Sept. 5. The rocket apparently put a Molniya communications satellite into orbit.

"We had predicted re-entry about 9:11 p.m. (MST), and the sightings would correlate with that re-entry," said Air Force Lt. Col. Chuck Wood, a NORAD spokesman. "If it was the object we were tracking, it was a Soviet rocket body."

Wood said the Soviet projectile was predicted to re-enter the Earth's atmosphere and burn up "somewhere over the western United States."

"There's a chance there would be pieces of it hit the Earth," Wood said. "Most objects that re-enter the atmosphere burn up, and that's probably what this did. The chances of any of it hitting the Earth are pretty small."

Reports of last night's fireball came from as far north as Oakland, Calif., and as far east as Albuquerque, N.M., a Federal Aviation Administration official said.

Scott Franson, 43, who was sitting outdoors with friends at a home in the desert resort town of Palm Springs, Calif., said he first thought the object was a crashing airliner.

"It was huge," Franson said. "It was extremely bright and you could see this tail of fire behind it."

"It's what I thought Halley's comet would look like."

Authorities in the desert north of Los Angeles said they received hundreds of calls, many of them reporting what they thought was a plane crash, after the fireball streaked across the sky.

"The tail on it was unbelievable," Franson said. "It seemed like it was a mile long. It moved sort of slow. We had time to go into the house and get people and it was still there."

He said it appeared to be moving to the southeast and disappeared from view over a mountain range.

Los Angeles County Firefighter Tom Kenney said the emergency switchboard in Antelope Valley, about 40 miles north of Los Angeles, received dozens of reports of sightings.

"Most of the people wanted to report a plane crash," Kenney said. "One person insisted he saw the plane with the engine on fire. We sent crews out to check but found no evidence of a crash. The reports were so spread out we knew it couldn't be a crash."