

NASA searching for cosmic feedback

\$85M project seeks life out there

By Paul Hoversten
USA TODAY

If E.T. is talking, NASA wants to listen.

The goal: Clear up one of life's oldest mysteries — "whether we are alone as an intelligent species in the universe, or whether there are others," says Bernard Oliver, project chief at Ames Research Center, Mountain View, Calif.

"Modern astronomy and biology predict that life is very common," he says.

The 10-year, \$85 million Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence will tune in to cosmic microwave transmissions from 1992-98.

NASA managers on March 1 will ask Congress for \$6.8 million this year to step up work that began in 1987.

Says chief investigator Jill Tarter: "We can't promise that the search will find a signal."

That irks critics such as retired Sen. William Proxmire, who doubts E.T. exists outside the minds of film producers.

"There've been no breakthroughs to justify the millions NASA wants to spend," says the Wisconsin Democrat. "What we need is intelligent life in Washington."

Since 1960, radio astronomers

around the world have searched various frequencies to no avail.

In 1983, the Planetary Society, headed by science guru Carl Sagan, launched Project Sentinel with a rented radio telescope from Harvard University. Scientists from the group, based in Pasadena, Calif., have since expanded the search from 131,000 to 8.4 million microwave channels.

NASA's attempt will be 10 billion times more intense. "We've got our nets cast very wide and the nets are very fine," says Oliver.

There are 200 billion to 400 billion stars in the Milky Way, which is just one of 100 billion galaxies in the universe. Sagan believes the universe may contain a billion civilizations.

NASA will use two methods: a high-intensity search of 800 stars — within 480 trillion miles of Earth — that resemble the sun and conceivably could support life; and a lower-intensity survey of the full sky.

Should a genuine signal come through, "I don't think there will be culture shock," says Oliver. "A lot of people are already prepared for it. They've watched so much fiction they'll probably be disappointed in what we find."

Electric ears waiting for E.T.'s call



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"I still feel it is a waste of money."

— Former Sen. William Proxmire



E.T.: We're trying to find some real extraterrestrials



AP

"It would be the exploratory discovery of the ages."

— Bernard Oliver, program director

Meanwhile, Earth sends out unending signals

NASA will listen for signals from space — but every day Earth sends messages in radio and TV broadcasts.

"Folks out there are learning about Earth even as we speak," says Jim Sharp, Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum planetarium director.

A new planetarium show opening

March 10 — "Calling All Stars" — takes viewers to distant stars where signals from Earth just now are arriving.

"Aliens could pick up our television," says Eugene Mallove, author of *The Quickening Universe*. "They probably could tell it's coming from the direction of our sun."