

13-14 October 2007

Army of telescopes on the hunt for ET

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SAN FRANCISCO: The most far-reaching search for extra-terrestrial life has begun as an array of radio telescopes were activated in northern California.

Forty-two radio dishes — part of the Allen Telescope Array in Hat Creek, 430km north of San Francisco — started collecting data from the furthest reaches of the universe yesterday.

The dishes will be part of an army of about 350 telescopes that are being deployed to help advance radio astronomy, the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence (SETI) Institute and the University of California, Berkeley, said in a statement.

“The ATA’s technical capabilities exponentially increase our ability to search for intelligent signals, and may lead to the discovery of thinking beings elsewhere in the universe,” said astronomer Seth Shostak of the SETI Institute in Mountain View, California.

“It is the first major telescope in the world built specifically for undertaking a search for extra-terrestrial intelligence.”

Mr Shostak has compared the project to the 1997 Hollywood

film *Contact*, in which Jodie Foster plays a scientist based at a remote monitoring station trying to decipher signals from a distant civilisation.

“The Allen Telescope Array will be like 200 million Jodie Fosters sitting out there listening,” Mr Shostak said.

The project is named after Microsoft co-founder and billionaire philanthropist Paul Allen, who donated funding in 2001.

Mr Allen joined scientists from SETI and Berkeley to launch the telescopes, which are able to monitor radio waves emitted by objects in space, allowing scientists to create a picture of astronomical bodies at distances, a feat not possible using telescopes operating at other wavelengths.

“They’re like souped-up, old-style TV dishes that, gathered together using state-of-the-art electronics and computing, create a very powerful and flexible radio telescope,” Mr Allen said.

“SETI is the long shot of long shots, but we can also use this for regular radio astronomy.”

AFP

Sunday
Australia