

Dear alien, can I add you to Facebook?

Richard Macey

THE Federal Government will offer Australians the chance to send messages to distant intelligent beings from today.

Not Canberra's beings, but those that may inhabit a world 20 light years from Earth.

Discovered in 2007, Gliese 581 d was the first planet found circling in the "Goldilocks" or "habitable zone" around another star, where it is neither too hot nor too cold for life.

The messages will be beamed to the planet from NASA's Tidbinbilla space-tracking station, outside Canberra, to mark National Science Week, which starts on Saturday.

Announcing the rare public opportunity to greet alien life

forms, the Minister for Innovation, Industry, Science and Research, Kim Carr, revealed he had crafted his cosmic communique: "Hello from Australia on the planet we call Earth. These messages express our people's dreams for the future. We want to share these dreams with you."

To post an interstellar message, earthlings must visit HelloFromEarth.net, which will operate from 10.30am today until August 24. Messages can contain up to 160 characters.

Travelling at light speed, they will not reach the planet until 2029. Replies should not be expected before 2049, if ever.

Gliese 581 d orbits so close to its star that its year lasts just 66.8 Earth days. But the "red dwarf"

star is much cooler than our Sun. As a result, the planet is cool enough for water.

Professor Stephane Udry, of the Geneva Observatory, has reported that the huge planet is far too big to be all rock. It could even be covered by a deep ocean, which would make it "the first serious water world candidate". Senator Carr said: "As a child I, like many Australians, stared up at the stars and wondered what was out there. Now science has allowed me to send a personal message that may answer that question."

A spokesman for the website, Wilson Da Silva, editor of the Australian magazine *COSMOS*, described the project as "like a message in a bottle, cast out into the stars".

Sydney Morning Herald 12 August 2009

John Palazzi ^{Sydney} Australia