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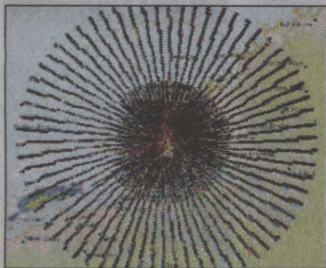
Weather has conspiracy theorists strung out

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INEXPLICABLY odd images on Bureau of Meteorology radar. Cyclones off the Australian coast and the most intense storm to hit Melbourne in living memory. A controversial US military facility in Alaska suspected of research into weather control . . .

It sounds like the plot of a sci-fi conspiracy thriller. In the past five months, the Bureau of Meteorology's weather radar has indeed recorded a number of very strange patterns — rings, loops, starbursts — at a number of places, including Melbourne, Broome and central Queensland, suggestive of some sort of massive interference.

In that time, cyclones Olga and Ului have lashed Queensland, and Melbourne was bombarded with hailstones in one of the most intense and costly



An image from the Bureau of Meteorology's Broome radar.

storms in the city's history.

And, yes, there is a US Air Force research program, the High Frequency Active Auroral Research Program (HAARP), based at Gakona, Alaska, that has attracted attention from conspiracy theorists for its high-powered transmitters and powerful radars.

So, since the start of the year, websites and blogs that specialise in pseudo-science and conspiracy — such as the one run by British crop-circle "investigator" Colin Andrews — have leapt on the notion that there could be a connection between the unusual radar patterns, the odd weather and HAARP.

"My website is receiving many thousands of visitors who are asking for an explanation for these (radar) patterns," wrote Mr Andrews on his website. "World class scientists have also contacted me . . . these scientists have expressed the opinion that the

top-secret joint program between the US, UK, Canada and Australian governments, called the High Frequency Active Auroral Research Program (HAARP), is behind the interference. They believe the program is involved in weather modification."

And there's more. "A much bigger international story is waiting in the wings about what, or who, caused the 1000-year super drought to turn into the 100-year super storm over Melbourne on Friday, March 5."

It's not the first time HAARP has come under scrutiny. Over the years, it's been blamed for floods, droughts, the Haiti earthquake, power outages and aircraft disasters.

But the Bureau of Meteorology, which has received numerous inquiries about the radar anomalies, including from Mr Andrews, isn't impressed.

And for sceptics, it's all too silly for words. HAARP is exactly what it professes to be, a facility researching Earth's upper atmosphere, and the radar images, while intriguing, aren't showing the results of a top-secret weather-control experiment.

According to a statement from the bureau to *The Sunday Age*, "reflectors such as physical obstructions, sea waves, insects and birds and atmospheric effects", as well as "interference from local transmission sources", are responsible for the unusual images.

The executive officer of Australian Skeptics, Tim Mendham, pointed out that Mr Andrews "believes in every conspiracy going — [end of the world] 2012, crop circles, everything".

Mr Mendham said Mr Andrews, and others of his ilk, had no evidence to support their theories but it was no use pointing this out. "There's no way of arguing with someone who claims it's a cover-up," he said. "No matter how much scientific evidence you give them, they can't give up. If someone gives them evidence disproving their theory they move sideways."

The Sunday Age tried to contact Mr Andrews, who is based in the US, but there was no reply. That could be because, according to his website, he was in Oregon for last weekend's 11th annual UFO Festival.



The Falcon 9 rocket takes off from Florida's Cape Canaveral on Friday, prompting possible sightings (insets) over Queensland early yesterday morning. PICTURES: REUTERS, HENRY LEEF, DESTIN SPARKS

UFO sighting likely to be US rocket

A BRIGHT spiralling light spotted in the sky over eastern Australia yesterday was probably a rocket, a Sydney astronomer said.

Onlookers reported a UFO heading east just before 6am.

Geoffrey Wyatt, from the Sydney Observatory, said it appeared to have been the Falcon 9 rocket launched in the United States an hour earlier.

"It's just gone around the world and everyone has seen it

adjusting or still ascending into its orbit," he said.

Space buffs should also look to the sky next Saturday when a Japanese space capsule is expected to land near Woomera, South Australia.