

SHS students to view space objects

By Jim Anderson
Correspondent

As one looks out into the night sky it's possible to look beyond Neptune, where lies a region known as the Kuiper (produced "kyper") Belt, a part of space filled with icy objects. This frozen expanse holds trillions of objects, remnants of the early times of the solar system's beginnings.

In 1951 astronomer Gerard Kuiper expanded upon earlier findings and predicted the existence of a belt of icy objects that now bears his name. The Kuiper belt is an elliptical plane in space spanning from 30 to 50 times Earth's distance from the sun, or 2.5 to 4.5 billion miles. The belt is similar to the asteroid belt found between Mars and Jupiter, although the objects in the Kuiper Belt are believed to be icy rather than rocky.

Scientists estimate that thousands of bodies more than 62 miles in diameter travel around the sun within this belt, along with trillions of smaller objects, many of which are short-period comets.

The desire to know more about this distant section of the solar system and the Kuiper Belt Objects (KBOs) is what's driving a new study, known as RECON: Research

and Education Collaborative Occultation Network.

The RECON study, financed in part by the National Science Foundation (NSF), will involve over 60 high schools, 12 colleges and community colleges, seven astronomy clubs, and two astronomy education centers from Northern Washington state to the Mexican border. NSF funding for RECON will also be used to provide camera systems to 54 sites and 46 CPC-1100 telescopes to several of the communities — one of which is the Sisters Astronomy Club (SAC).

Rima Givot, Sisters High School (SHS) science teacher, will be collaborating with Redmond High School and SAC in setting up the student crews to operate the telescopes and cameras.

"The RECON project offers a great opportunity for students to participate in a collaborative astronomical study," Givot said. "SHS students will be invited to join the Sisters astronomy group to view stars slated to be obscured by asteroids in the Kuiper Belt and to assist in recording the events throughout the year."

"This unique project has the potential to involve many community citizen-scientists along

the West Coast, and it will be rewarding for our students to be able to contribute to our community efforts. I am very excited that we are able to be a part of the RECON project."

Ron Thorkildson and Thomas Jeffrey will teach the students how to operate the equipment. Both will attend a RECON work session in Pasco, Washington, April 16-19 to learn how to operate the data collecting equipment, and return to Sisters with a CPC-1100 11-inch telescope, camera system, timing device, focusing mask, adapters, laptop computer and battery pack for the students' use.

By early May, the network will be fully prepared to conduct up to eight coordinated observation campaigns of Kuiper Belt Objects each year through 2019.



PHOTO BY JIM ANDERSON

Ron Thorkildson and Thomas Jeffrey preparing a telescope to help SHS students who will be viewing Kuiper Belt objects in May.

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