Scientists take experiment to river

NASA experts in Redding for satellite project

By Dylan Darling (Contact)
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Building a satellite they hope will be able to scan the globe and assess the amount of fresh surface water, space scientists are first focusing on the Sacramento River in Redding.

Photo by Andreas Fuhrmann / Record Searchlight

Charles Strong, center, of Redding, speaks with Maurio Grando, an engineer with the NASA Jet Propulsion Laboratory on the Diestelhorst Bridge. The scientists are collecting data to measure water surface from space.

The National Aeronautics and Space Administration scientists are trying to perfect a radar system that will map what's water and what's not. To test the equipment, they're using Redding's three pedestrian bridges across the river - and the variety of rippling, raging or smooth water below them.

"For us it's fabulous," said Delwyn Moller, a senior engineer for NASA.

Sunday and Monday they set up on the Diestelhorst Bridge. Today they plan to start a two- to three-day stint on the Sundial Bridge and later they'll be on the Stress Ribbon Bridge near Keswick Dam, she said.

During their two days on the Diestelhorst Bridge the scientists had numerous passersby stop to see what they were doing with their equipment, which includes an aluminum frame holding a black cylinder pointed at the water, said Ernesto Rodriguez, a project scientist for NASA. Happy to answer questions from the curious, Rodriguez said he also gave a talk about the project Monday afternoon at Turtle Bay Exploration Park.

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The radar will trace water "in rivers, lakes - everywhere," from space, he said. By comparing maps from different seasons and years, scientists could see how water supplies around the world change. It would take the satellite 10 days to crisscross the world and compile a map.

Rodriguez said the scientists will also test their equipment on waters in the Everglades in Florida and the bayous of Louisiana near New Orleans.

In the works since 1998, the satellite would make it to space in about 2015, if Congress finds it worth the usual close to $300 million to $500 million price tag of a spaceborne mission, Rodriguez said.

Turtle Bay has put up educational panels about the project, and just having the scientists working the Sacramento River gives people a chance to learn about a space project close to home, said Mary Harper, education and programs manager at Turtle Bay.

Although mention of NASA conjures up thoughts of rockets, rovers and space shuttles, Harper said this mission is starting close to earth.

"They are actually doing it straight off the bridge," she said.

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