NASA establishes new office to study cosmic phenomena

by Dwayne Brown

WASHINGTON - NASA has created a new office to study in more detail some of the universe's most exotic phenomena: dark energy, black holes and cosmic microwave background radiation.The new Einstein Probes Office will facilitate NASA's future medium-class science missions to investigate these profound cosmic mysteries. The office will be housed in the Beyond Einstein Program Office at NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center, Greenbelt, Md.The Beyond Einstein Program consists of five proposed missions: two major observatories and three smaller probes. Technology development already is under way on the proposed observatories. The Laser Interferometer Space Antenna would orbit the sun measuring gravitational waves in our galaxy and beyond. Constellation-X would view matter falling into supermassive black holes. The proposed probes would investigate the nature of dark energy, the physics of the Big Bang and the distribution and types of black holes in the universe. NASA previously has supported initial mission concept studies for the Dark Energy, Inflation, and Black Hole Finder probes. The agency currently is funding three other, more detailed, dark energy mission concept studies. NASA and the U.S. Department of Energy have commissioned a National Research Council committee to assess which of the Beyond Einstein missions should be developed and launched first. The assessment will be based on scientific impact, technology readiness and budgetary considerations. The committee's recommendations are due to be released in September 2007."We look forward to receiving the recommendations of the committee," said Jon Morse, director of the Astrophysics Division in NASA's Science Mission Directorate, Washington. "Adding this new office to the existing logistical support for the Beyond Einstein Program will help us react swiftly to the committee's assessment."The Beyond Einstein Program is designed to provide key information to help answer fundamental questions about the origin and evolution of the universe. The Beyond Einstein spacecraft will build on such current NASA missions as the Hubble Space Telescope, Chandra X-ray Observatory and Wilkinson Microwave Anisotropy Probe.

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