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Alien life in 20 years?

NASA scientist
says maybe



Ellen Stofan, chief scientist of NASA, speaks Saturday morning during the Lake Placid Institute for the Arts and Humanities 2015 Adirondack Roundtable series.

(Enterprise photo — Matthew Turner)

By MATTHEW TURNER
Staff Writer

LAKE PLACID — Proof of alien life on other planets may be found within the next two decades, according to NASA's chief scientist who spoke Saturday in Lake Placid.

Ellen Stofan spoke about that possibility during the Lake Placid Institute for the Arts and Humanities' 2015 Adirondack Roundtable series.

"To me, we are on the verge," Stofan said. "We've had this question for a millennium. Are we alone? We know where to go to make the measurements. We have the technology to make the measurements. It's just a question of executing it. We're so close."

Stofan said in about 20 years, NASA could likely get strong indications of life on another planet or moon.

"We actually have a rover, the Curiosity rover right on Mars, and every day Curiosity is making measurements," Stofan said. "It has actually found indications of organics on the surface. It has found an indication of methane."

Curiosity's mission on Mars is to find out if the planet ever had an environment capable of supporting life. The rover arrived on Mars in 2012.

Stofan said the organic materials it found on Mars are still being analyzed.

"Are those organic molecules that we can attribute to life?" she asked rhetorically. "The problem is, any organic material that stays very long

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on the surface of Mars gets bombarded by cosmic radiation. In about 10 to 20 years, it actually breaks up the organic molecule into pieces. You can find these organic molecules, but you don't know how they're stuck together."

Stofan said another rover is expected to launch in 2020 to Europa, one of Saturn's moons. That rover is outfitted with a microscopic camera to look for indications of ancient life.

"I think there is a chance that one of those rovers could find some indications," she said.

NASA is also searching for life on other planets with the same "building blocks" as those on Earth.

"We've discovered amino acids in interstellar clouds. There's amino acids in comets," Stofan said. "The building blocks of life here on Earth have been delivered all over the solar system. So if life elsewhere has taken advantage of those organic molecule building blocks that have been distributed everywhere, one would assume it would have similarities to life here on Earth."

Nevertheless, Stofan said those assumptions could be 100 percent wrong and that views are split in the scientific community about what life could be like elsewhere.