

UC-Santa Barbara to direct Mars soil test

December 14 2005

The European Space Agency announced Tuesday its support of a program that will include development of an instrument for testing deep soil samples on Mars.

The testing, to be conducted during a European mission called ExoMars, will be directed by University of California-Santa Barbara research scientist Luann Becker.

"We are very excited about this," said Becker. "It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity."

Testing by the two NASA rovers currently operating on Mars has spurred ESA interest in developing different, new and highly-sensitive instruments to search for present or past life on Mars.

The ExoMars rover will contain a drill that can reach soil samples up to 6 1/2 feet (two meters) under the Martian surface.

Becker said she anticipates the American contribution to the ESA's Molecular Organic Molecule Analyzer development will be funded by NASA.

MOMA will be included as part of the ExoMars mission to Mars in 2011.

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Citation: UC-Santa Barbara to direct Mars soil test (2005, December 14) retrieved 21 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2005-12-uc-santa-barbara-mars-soil.html>

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