

NASA OKs construction of satellite

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NASA has approved construction of a satellite that will scan the entire sky in infrared light to detect cool stars and bright galaxies.

The Wide-field Infrared Survey Explorer, in its design stage at the University of California-Los Angeles for eight years, is to be launched late in 2009. It will orbit the Earth and operate for at least seven months, with data expected to be broadcast several times daily.

Edward Wright, UCLA professor of physics and astronomy, is WISE's principal investigator. NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, Calif., will manage the mission, with JPL's William Irace as project manager, NASA said.

WISE will survey the cosmos with infrared detectors 500 times more sensitive than those used in previous survey missions.

Wright said that 99 percent of the sky has not been observed yet with this kind of sensitivity, and that the survey should be able to find and observe at least 100 million galaxies and hundreds of nearby cool stars that are currently undetectable.

"This mission has incredible power for discovery," Wright said. "I expect that what we find will be amazing. There is still so much we don't know."

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