

NASA funds search for past life on Mars

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The National Aeronautics and Space Administration has awarded a \$750,000 grant to a U.S. researcher for help in searching for evidence of past life on Mars.

NASA is funding the work by University of California-Santa Barbara organic chemist Luann Becker to further develop the Mars Organic Molecule Analyzer -- an instrument nicknamed MOMA that will search for the remnants of life on Mars.

The analyzer -- a mass spectrometer -- will examine soil samples taken from up to 6 1/2 feet below the surface of Mars. It will be one of a suite of 10 instruments in the European Space Agency's ExoMars "Pasteur" payload, scheduled to arrive on Mars in 2013.

Becker is the principal investigator of a team that includes French and German scientists, as well as two co-investigators from Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore.

NASA said ExoMars is to be launched from the Kourou space port in French Guiana and will deploy a highly mobile rover equipped with a drill to provide the first subsurface vertical profile of Mars.

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