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May 2, 2004

Contraails do count

By [Karen McCowan](#)
The Register-Guard

Cue "X-Files" music: Maybe we do need to worry about those contraails snaking through the skies overhead.

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For years, contrail conspiracy theorists have competed with UFO sighters and alien abduction survivors for air time on late-night radio's "Art Bell Overnight."

Their claim: Those puffy, white jet wakes are no mere water vapor, but chemicals sprayed by the government to (a) kill us, or (b) activate mind control chips secretly implanted in our bodies.

Laughable? Why then has NASA launched a project to engage ordinary citizens - even schoolkids - in monitoring the jet fuel leavings?

In a word: climate.

NASA scientist Lin Chambers is a principal investigator with CERES, a satellite project that monitors the impact of contraails - essentially man-made clouds - on the Earth's radiant energy systems. Early evidence suggests that lingering contraails affect surface conditions in two ways, particularly in areas below major air corridors.

"During the daytime, less sunlight gets to the Earth," Chambers said. "And at

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nighttime, more heat is trapped so temperatures are warmer."

Chambers also directs a program called S'COOL, or "Students' Clouds Observations On-Line," in which thousands of schoolchildren all over the globe chart contrails and cloud formations in their own corner of the sky, then send the data to NASA. The ground-based reporting is designed to verify the contrail tracking conducted by NASA satellites Terra and Aqua, she said.



NASA is studying contrails such as these seen over the Willamette Valley last summer.

Photo: **Chris Pietsch** / The Register-Guard

But the agency also made a special appeal on Earth Day - April 22 - for contrail reports from anyone, anywhere. NASA posted a simplified reporting form on its Web site: Observers were to count the contrails they saw that day and classify them into one of three categories: short-lived (dissipating just behind the plane); persistent (lingering for hours); or persistent-spreading (essentially, morphing into cirrus clouds).

Perhaps for lack of publicity, the response was "quite disappointing," said Chambers, who is now analyzing that data.

"We got maybe 200 reports," she said. "We hope to try again next year and let more people know about it ahead of time."

While the Earth Day project was intended as a one-day snapshot of global contrail patterns, NASA welcomes volunteers of any age who'd like to become contrail reporters on an ongoing basis. Prospective cloud watchers can contact the S'COOL Web site, and Chambers will respond from her office at NASA Langley.

Wait just a minute.

NASA *Langley*? As in, CIA headquarters? Where her colleagues are Agents Scully and Mulder?

Chambers laughed. She gets that a lot. "It's a common mistake," she said. "We're in *Hampton*, Virginia, near Virginia Beach. We're named Langley not for the town, but after Smithsonian founder Samuel Pierpoint Langley."

Yeah, right.

And that wasn't an alien spaceship hovering outside my window last night.

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COUNTING CONTRAILS

Here's where to find information on becoming a NASA contrail "reporter."

- **NASA Contrail Project Web**

site: www.globe.gov/fsl/html/templ.cgi?earthday2004

- **Project scientist:** Lin.H.Chambers@nasa.gov

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