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University of California at Berkeley's Dr. J.R. Forster, resident astronomer at the Hat Creek Radio Observatory, looks out on the Allen Telescope Array Tuesday, in Hat Creek, Calif.

Powerful new Allen Telescope Array sweeping heavens for signs of life

BERKELEY, Calif. (AP) — The search for intelligent life out there is getting a boost.

Scientists today planned to formally dedicate phase one of a powerful new telescope that will sweep the skies for all kinds of data, including any echoes of distant civilizations that may be scattered among the stars.

Astronomers have high hopes for the Allen Telescope Array because of its ability to look at big patches of the sky and process that information quickly.

"We can do things that much faster because we see so much more of the sky all at once," said Leo Blitz, astronomy professor at the University of California, Berkeley.

The new array, named after donor and Microsoft co-founder Paul G. Allen, is being built by UC Berkeley's Radio Astronomy Laboratory, directed by Blitz, and the Mountain View-

based SETI Institute dedicated to the search for extraterrestrial intelligence.

Ultimately, the array, located at the Hat Creek Radio Observatory in a remote area of Northern California about 260 miles north of San Francisco, will number 350 dishes. The first 42 are online and will be formally launched at a ceremony today.

The array consists of dishes 20-feet in diameter that are knit together with the latest in communications technology, creating a device that is nimble and easy to upgrade.

It works by observing radio waves emitted by objects in space. Radio astronomers study the signals to create a picture of things millions of light years away. The Allen array's ability to scan large sections quickly means a better opportunity to get a fix on objects that may just

flash briefly.

In addition to more conventional radio astronomy, the array can multitask, simultaneously scanning solar-type stars for artificially produced signals, a possible indication of extraterrestrial intelligence.

Allen, who will be at the dedication today, said he was struck by the array's dual applications of general science as well as the SETI work. "It gets to the heart of these fundamental questions of what is that greater universe in space," he said.

James Moran, chair of Harvard University's astronomy department, called the array "quite tremendous."

"The big thing is that most radio telescopes essentially make an image of a small patch of the sky, it's rather inflexible," he said. "The ATA has this enormous flexibility of signal processing."