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NEWS RELEASE

World-Famous Astronomer to Lead State Park Star Parties Featuring *Comet Lulin*

Dr. Alan Hale of Comet Hale-Bopp Fame to Present Programs Feb. 20, 27 and March 6

SANTA FE, N.M. – Comet Lulin is fast approaching Earth and Living Desert, Brantley Lake and Bottomless Lakes state parks welcome its arrival with star parties on Feb. 20, Feb. 27, and March 6 that will be led by noted comet astronomer Dr. Alan Hale. Hale, who co-discovered the Hale-Bopp comet in July 1995, will orient visitors to the solar system and our place in the Universe during a PowerPoint presentation and telescope viewing at each of the three parks. In addition, state parks will host three other star parties in late February.

“I’ll have some great photos from the Hubbell Telescope as well as from my colleagues,” said Hale. “There will be several telescopes outside and the next three weeks offer the best opportunity to see comet Lulin.”

Comet Lulin, named for the Lulin Observatory in Taiwan where it initially was photographed, is the “starring” comet of the season. Because it is orbiting on an elliptic in the opposite direction to the planets, the comet appears to be zooming by at an accelerated rate and viewers will be able to see that apparent speed against the starry night sky. By Feb. 24, it could be visible to the naked eye in dark rural areas such as the clear desert skies of southeastern New Mexico.

“I’m so pleased to support these special state park education programs,” said Rep. Nora Espinoza (R-Chavez/Otero). “Southern New Mexico has such beautiful starry skies that we should appreciate, show off, and learn from.”

Rep. Espinoza sponsored a special appropriation to the State Parks “Reach for the Sky” astronomy program that is making Dr. Hale’s partnership with State Parks possible.

“We are honored to have Dr. Hale as a partner and presenter,” said State Park Director Dave Simon. “These events will be truly special and we hope to have a big turnout.”

Comet Lulin’s unearthly greenish hue comes from gases that glow when exposed to sunlight. Astronomers believe this may be the comet’s first visit to the inner solar system because of its parabolic trajectory, which could make for some interesting and unpredictable behavior in its first close encounter with the Sun. Comet Lulin will fade from view around mid-March as quickly as it appears and won’t come around again for 1,000 years.

Hale also will look at other recent astronomical findings such as a recently-discovered exoplanet – a planet beyond

the solar system orbiting a star other than the Sun. This one is the smallest known exoplanet, orbiting its sun every 20 hours with a scorching surface temperature of 1800 degrees.

“I’ll be talking about our place in the galaxy – how it is in relation to the Universe and objects in solar system,” said Hale. “Saturn will be well-placed this spring to see the ring system in the plane of view and by June there will be good views of the center of the galaxy.”

The schedule of star parties with Dr. Alan Hale is as follows:

Feb. 20 – 6:00 p.m. Living Desert Zoo and Gardens State Park Visitor Center, Carlsbad, call 575-887-5516 for more information

Feb. 27—6:00 p.m. Brantley Lake State Park, Limestone Campground, Carlsbad, call 575-624-6029 for more information

March 6 – 6:00 p.m. Bottomless Lakes State Park, Lea Lake Pavilion, Roswell, call 575-624-6058 for more information

In addition, Comet Lulin, Venus, Saturn and other heavenly bodies also will be viewed at state park star parties in the southwest region presented by volunteers from the National Public Observatory of Radium Springs:

Feb. 21 – 6:30 – 8:30 p.m. Leasburg Dam State Park, Las Cruces with Jeff Jenkins, call 575-575-524-4068 for more information

Feb. 21 - 7:00 – 8:30 p.m. City of Rocks State Park, Deming with Matt Wilson, call 575-536-2800 for more information

Feb. 28 - 7:00 – 8:45 p.m. Rockhound State Park, Deming with Sally Allen, call 575-546-6182 for more information

Star Parties are part of State Parks’ “Reach for the Stars” program for astronomy education that includes star parties, night sky protection and a statewide astronomy school curriculum now under development. For more information about Reach for the Stars call Steve Cary, parks natural resource planner, at 505-476-3386, toll-free at 888-NMPARKS or visit www.nmparks.com

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The Energy, Minerals and Natural Resources Department provides resource protection and renewable energy resource development services to the public and other state agencies.

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