

‘Beautiful Eye Candy’: Frozen Plains In Pluto’s Heart

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CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — Vast frozen plains exist next door to Pluto’s big, rugged mountains sculpted of ice, scientists said Friday, three days after humanity’s first-ever flyby of the dwarf planet.

The New Horizons spacecraft team revealed close-up photos of those plains, which they’re already unofficially calling Sputnik Planum after the world’s first man-made satellite.

“Have a look at the icy frozen plains of Pluto,” principal scientist Alan Stern said during a briefing at NASA headquarters. “Who would have expected this kind of complexity?”

Stern described the pictures coming down from 3 billion miles away as “beautiful eye candy.”

“I’m still having to remind myself to take deep breaths,” added Jeff Moore, head of the New Horizons geology team at NASA’s Ames Research Center in California. “I mean, the landscape is just astoundingly amazing.”

Spanning hundreds of miles, the plains are located in the prominent, bright, heart-shaped area of Pluto. Like the mountains unveiled Wednesday, the plains look to be a relatively young 100 million years old — at the most. Scientists speculate internal heating — perhaps from icy volcanoes or geysers — might still be shaping these crater-free regions.

“This could be only a week old for all we know,” Moore said. He stressed that scientists have no hard



NASA
The latest two full-frame images of Pluto and Charon were collected separately by New Horizons during approach on July 13 and July 14, 2015. The relative reflectivity, size, separation and orientations of Pluto and Charon are approximated in this composite image, and they are shown in approximate true color.

evidence of erupting, geyser-like plumes on Pluto — yet.

Another possibility could be that the terrain, like frozen mud cracks on Earth, formed as a result of contraction of the surface.

The plains — which include clusters of smooth hills and fields of small pits — are covered with irregular-shaped, or polygon, sections that look to be separated by troughs. Each

section is roughly 12 miles across.

The height of the hills is not yet known, nor their origin. It could be the hills were pushed up from below, or are knobs surrounded by eroded terrain, according to Moore. The fields of pits resemble glacial fields on Earth.

As of Friday’s news conference, New Horizons was just over 2 million miles past

Pluto and operating well. The spacecraft on Tuesday became the first visitor to the 4.5 billion-year-old Pluto, sweeping within 7,700 miles of its icy surface after a journey of 9 1/2 years. It represented the last planetary stop on NASA’s grand tour of the solar system, begun a half-century ago.

“I’m a little biased, but I think the solar system saved the best for last,” Stern, a

Southwest Research Institute planetary scientist, told reporters.

On Wednesday — just one day after the historic flyby — Stern and his team unveiled zoom-in photos showing 11,000-foot mountain ranges on Pluto, akin to the Rockies here on Earth. The plains are the mountains’ neighbors to the north. The peaks are now known, informally at least, as the Norgay Montes. Tenzing Norgay was the Sherpa guide

for Sir Edmund Hillary when they conquered Mount Everest in 1953.

The huge, encompassing heart-shaped region already bears the last name of Clyde Tombaugh, the late American astronomer who discovered Pluto in 1930.

New Horizons’ science team promised Friday that the data will allow them to produce elevation maps of both Pluto and its big moon Charon.

20 Vehicles Destroyed In California Wildfire

HESPERIA, Calif. (AP) — A fast-moving wildfire swept across a freeway Friday in a Southern California mountain pass, destroying 20 vehicles and sending motorists running to safety before it burned at least five homes. There were no reports of serious injuries, authorities said.

Fanned by hot desert winds, the fire started along Interstate 15 — the main highway between Southern California and Las Vegas — and spread quickly.

Dozens of vehicles were abandoned and hundreds of others turned onto side roads to get away from the flames as water-dropping helicopters flew over the Cajon Pass area about 55 miles northeast of Los Angeles.

Motorists stuck on the road described a harrowing scene.

“It’s crazy, you’re watching black clouds and white clouds of smoke, there’s a ridgeline off to my right ... and it looks like any second flames will come over the ridgeline,” Chris Patterson, 43, said from his

vehicle.

It’s not uncommon for wildfires to reach freeways in California. It was unclear, however, why dozens of cars were caught along Interstate 15, forcing frightened people to flee on foot.

U.S. Forest Service spokesman Uriah Hernandez said no injuries had been confirmed.

The agency said the fire had burned at least 3, 500 acres and was threatening the rural community of Baldy Mesa.

San Bernardino County Fire officials said at least five homes were burned and another 50 were threatened by the flames. An additional 10 cars on the freeway were damaged by the fire.

“People are spectating from our parking lot, running around getting water and beer. It’s chaos,” Atalla said. “One man came in and said, ‘Oh my, my house is getting burned.’”

“I haven’t seen a fire that big and so close to us. It really was huge,” Martinez said.

Pipeline

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“I’m a bit conflicted, as I imagine most persons would be in this type of situation,” Hanson said.

Commission chairman Chris Nelson used a July 16 letter from TransCanada to specifically exclude the various items.

After the unanimous vote, Nelson told the lawyers that what he heard from both sides Friday was “probably frustration with the other side’s attorney and attempt to discredit the other side’s attorney.”

He asked that they keep their focus on the issue going forward.

TransCanada received a state permit in 2010 for the project but President Barack Obama’s administration hasn’t granted clearance yet for the pipeline from Alberta to pierce the Canada-U.S. border.

State law requires that after four years the commission reconsider a construction permit to ensure all of the permit conditions can still be met.

That will be the purpose of the evidentiary hearing that opens July 27 and is scheduled to run for a total of seven days over a span of two weeks.

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