

NASA honors Winthrop man

Medal is the top
non-governmental
award for service

By **Garrett Rudolph**
The Chronicle

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Okanogan County isn't exactly known as a hotbed for scientists who study outer space, but a Winthrop man was recently recognized by NASA for a lifetime of achievements.

Thomas McCord, the founder and director of Bear Fight Institute in Winthrop, received the Distinguished Public Service Medal on Thursday at NASA headquarters.

According to NASA, the medal is given to a non-government individual "whose



McCord

distinguished service, ability, or vision has personally contributed to NASA's advancement of United States' interests." It is the organiza-

tion's highest form of recognition for a non-government individual.

McCord, 74, said he has won a number of professional

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Award from 1A

awards in his career, but none at this national level.

"It's a big deal to me," McCord said by phone while attending a workshop at California Technical Institute. "There are so many deserving people that do not receive such awards... I feel honored that I would be considered."

McCord is the founder and director of Bear Fight Institute, which focuses on the formation, evolution and present state of the earth and other plants. McCord is a physicist who applies his knowledge of physics to the study of the solar system.

Prior to founding Bear Fight Institute in 2002, McCord had been a longtime university professor.

He was a professor at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, before heading to

the University of Hawaii to further his research goals. Although he has spent some time as a teaching professor, mostly with graduate students, most of his research work was in his own laboratory. Hawaii offered a world-class facility with some of the best telescopes available.

After retiring from university life, he wanted to continue his research, thus founding Bear Fight Institute.

He admits the location is a bit unusual for a facility that studies space and space travel.

He had owned a second home in the Methow Valley for years, he said.

When he decided to branch out with his own research institute, his first question was, "If you build it, will they come?"

And they did.

The institute features a small group of resident scientists and technical staff at its 3,000-square-foot converted

farmhouse, tucked near the Pasayten Wilderness Area. It often has visiting scientists from around the world.

Although McCord is technically retired, he still stays plenty busy.

On Monday, he was in Pasadena, Calif., taking part in a workshop directed at planning a new space mission.

"I haven't noticed much of the retirement part," he said.

Notable past recipients of the Distinguished Public Service Medal have been author Carl Sagan and astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson.

"The individual's achievement or contribution must demonstrate a level of excellence that has made a profound or indelible impact to NASA mission success, therefore, the contribution is so extraordinary that other forms of recognition by NASA would be inadequate," the NASA website said.