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Duo keen to study bolts from the blue

Kalgoorlie Miner, Kalgoorlie



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Phoebe Pin

Two American researchers will join Kalgoorlie-Boulder's dedicated storm chasers in the coming months as they seek to better understand the behaviour of lightning.

New Mexico Tech's Professor Richard Sonnenfeld and PhD candidate Dan Jensen have been in town for two weeks as part of Curtin University's Fulbright Scholarship Program which allows scholars from the US to undertake research in the areas of resources and energy in Australia.

Their work will focus on observing and understanding the attachment of lightning to tall structures and will help researchers at Curtin improve lightning protection of mine head frames, wind turbines, and other tall structures in the energy industry.

Professor Sonnenfeld said Kalgoorlie-Boulder was the ideal location to gather data about phenomena such as lightning.

"It turns out that rural places are good places for doing any kind of earth science research," he said. "Specifically what drew us to Kalgoorlie was the idea that it is a small town with a strong university that could support us.

"We knew that (Kalgoorlie) had lightning, even though it doesn't have as much lightning as Darwin or South Africa but we don't need a lot.

"And (Kalgoorlie) had a bunch of towers that were all close to each other so if we want to study lightning striking towers, we can do that here."

The pair will use equipment such as high-speed cameras and radio telescopes to collect their data.

Professor Sonnenfeld said they had yet to experience a Kalgoorlie-Boulder storm.

"We have both been looking at the weather forecasts and maybe Tuesday or Wednesday there will be a storm," he said.

Professor Sonnenfeld will deliver a free public lecture about his work at the Museum of the Goldfields on March 5 at 5.30pm.



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Richard Sonnenfeld and Dan Jensen are in Kalgoorlie-Boulder to research lightning strikes on tall structures in the region. Picture: Kelsey Reid



Lightning strike. Collins Photography