IS IT CONTAMINATION OR EXTRATERRESTRIAL LIFE? A BLACK AND WHITE DECISION, OR 50 SHADES OF GRAY? J.D. Rummel[1] and C.A. Conley[2], [1]East Carolina University, Greenville, NC <rummelj@ecu.edu>, [2]NASA Headquarters, Washington, D.C. <cassie.conley@nasa.gov>

Introduction: Understanding the natural distribution of life in the universe, including in our local solar system, is one of the prime goals of astrobiology. The ability of human explorers (and tourists) and their robots to spread life from one neighborhood into another, confounding that understanding, is therefore a major concern to astrobiologists. It is more parsimonious to track human exploration via a written or electronic record than by tracking their contamination (although for early solar system, and particularly Mars, exploration missions, we may be left with no other choices).

This abstract is a placeholder for a possible panel discussion to be held to discuss the role of COSPAR and Agency planetary protection policies in protecting the science of astrobiology (and other aspects of human interest affected by microbiology) by protecting against the introduction of human-associated and robotic microbial contamination into places where Earth organisms might grown and thrive, and where native organisms might be harmed or potentially obliterated by the introduction of Earth organisms. The current planetary protection policy of COSPAR [1] will form the backdrop of the panel's discussions, as will the current astrobiology roadmap or strategic plan.

Potential speakers: Depending on the context of the panel, experts in life detection, microorganism survival, organic contamination, and human exploration capabilities would be recruited. In addition to the authors of this abstract, participants could include D. Schulze-Makuch, A. Faíren, D. Glavin, C. McKay, P. Boston, J. Eigenbrode, and others.

References: [1] COSPAR: Planetary Protection Policy (revised 24 March 2011). COSPAR, Paris, France, 2011.