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10 June 2010

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Funding crisis for nuclear fusion project ITER

Published: 10 June 2010



A multi-billion euro international research project has run into deep financial trouble as EU governments scramble to find money to meet spiralling costs. However, with European credibility at stake, officials say there is no question of abandoning the project despite the yawning funding gaps.

Europe's bill for the France-based [ITER project](#) has almost trebled, leaving cash-strapped finance ministers to question the merits of the investment.

Euratom, the European Atomic Energy Community, could be asked to fork out close to €6 billion, with France liable for a further €1.3 billion in its capacity as host country for the plant.

Construction is scheduled to begin in 2012, leading critics to call for the project to be shelved before it gathers further momentum. However, advocates point out that ITER is the subject of an international agreement which would be difficult to break.

The ITER reactor aims to replicate the kind of fusion that occurs in the sun as an abundant source of energy.

Last month, research ministers met in Brussels to discuss the future of the initiative in light of its rising costs. Ministers reiterated their commitment to ITER but could not agree a detailed plan on a way forward. Instead they set up a task force to find a solution by the summer.

Cost-containment measures and improved financial management are likely to be part of the task force's discussions, but the bigger challenge is to pull funding from other sources to save the project.

Conflict on plugging funding gap

National governments are at odds with the European Commission on how the funding shortfall should be addressed. Brussels is pushing for an injection of fresh funds, while ministers insist that the money should be drawn from existing sources. The precise mechanism for doing that has fuelled ongoing political tension.

The Commission has outlined a range of possibilities, including tapping into the EU's framework programme for research. This has met with resistance because it is not clear what programmes would have to be sacrificed to save ITER.

The idea of seeking a loan from the European Investment Bank has also been floated but the Commission is wary of this option – a fact that critics say illustrates the inherent financial risk of the investment.

Delaying the construction timeline would allow the EU to spread its costs over a long period but would likely cause friction with other ITER partners such as China, Japan and the US.

EU position unclear ahead of meeting

The ITER Council, which governs the project, meets in China on 16 and 17 June but it is far from certain that Europe will have a clear position on where it will find additional money.

The task force set up by research ministers has already met twice this month (3 and 5 June) and could meet twice more in the coming weeks. The issue will also be discussed when diplomats meet in Brussels next month ahead of the next Competitiveness Council in July.

Key elements of the ITER Council agenda could be postponed if a deal cannot be reached in the meantime, but diplomats say that unilaterally withdrawing from the international

BACKGROUND

The ITER project is an experimental thermonuclear reactor based in Cadarache in southern France.

The French site saw off rival bids from Japan, Spain and Canada.

Fusion research is touted by its proponents as a potential source of cheap, abundant and carbon-free fuel. However, sceptics say fusion has been a pipedream for decades and there remains scant evidence that it will yield practical results. There are also question marks over safety, according to environmentalists, who want the funding diverted to renewable energy research.

The initiative began as a US-Russian project in the 1980s but now includes the EU, China, India, Japan and South Korea. 45% of the funding for the project comes from Europe, with a sizeable contribution from France. The remainder of the money is contributed by the other members.

In 2001, total construction costs were estimated at around €5.9 billion and building was expected to be completed over a ten-year period. However, this has almost tripled to €16 billion, with critics claiming that the final bill could be even higher. Construction is yet to begin.

VIDEO

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