



Wednesday, November 17, 2004

## EU proposes nuclear fusion plant without Japan if there's no accord

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BRUSSELS — The European Commission on Tuesday recommended that the European Union should go ahead by itself in building a nuclear fusion plant if no agreement is reached with Japan, according to a report from Strasbourg, France.

Japan, the European Union, the United States, Russia, China and South Korea are collaborating on the international nuclear fusion project, known as ITER, but have been unable to iron out differences over where to site the project.

"The Commission will try to reach a positive conclusion with all the parties as soon as possible," said the European Union's executive, while EU research commissioner Louis Michel said he hoped for an accord by the end of the year.

"If, nevertheless, the parties do not reach the hoped-for consensus, the EU would launch the construction of ITER within the largest possible framework," the Commission added.

ITER is a test bed for what is being billed as a clean, safe, inexhaustible energy source of the future. The project, emulating the sun's nuclear fusion, is not expected to generate electricity before 2050.

Diplomats say talks in Vienna last week made some progress but failed to break the essential deadlock over the two candidate sites for ITER — Cadarache in southern France and Rokkasho in northern Japan.

"I hope that we will succeed by the end of the year," Michel told the European Parliament. "If we need several days or several weeks more to be sure of having the six partners on board I think that it is worth it."

However, he cautioned against setting artificial deadlines. "The stakes are so high that we should not put our backs to the wall with deadlines," he told the Strasbourg-based EU assembly.

The ITER budget is projected to be 10 billion euros (\$13 billion) over the next 30 years, including 4.7 billion euros to build the reactor. The European Union plans to finance 40% of the total.

France said at the end of September that it was ready to double its financial stake in the project, bringing it up to 914 million euros, or 20% of total construction cost.

EU officials have said the bloc has offered Japan a "sweetener" to allow France to host the project, but refused to elaborate further.

"I cannot elaborate on the sweetener, but I think we have made reasonable offers," European Commission spokesman Fabio Fabbi told reporters earlier this month.

Sources at the commission in Brussels have suggested that Tokyo might agree to a tradeoff scenario in which it lets ITER go to France if Japan gets to be host country for a new international scientific computing centre.

The fact that a research center already exists in Cadarache is seen as a strong point in the EU's favor. Locating ITER at a site that employs 3,500 science experts of which 400 specialize in nuclear fusion would help ITER get off the ground faster.

"They could take advantage of the existing infrastructure. They could start working at the very first day without losing their autonomy," a source close to the talks said earlier this month. (Wire reports)

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