

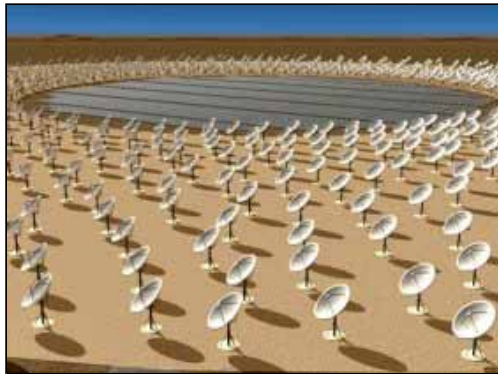


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## SKA project gets votes of confidence, despite global crisis

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Published: 26 Feb 09



The EU has confirmed its support for the international €1,5-billion Square Kilometre Array (SKA) radio telescope project, despite the global recession.

The SKA will be the world's biggest radio telescope, and it will be built in either South Africa's Northern Cape province (with outstations elsewhere in the country and spread across eight other African countries) or in Australia (with, possibly, outstations in New Zealand).

This confirmation of support has been given by an official of the European Commission at the international SKA Forum in Cape Town. He is Dr Robert-Jan Smits, who is a director in the European Commission's Directorate-General of Research and who heads Directorate B: European Research Area: research programmes and capacity.

Smits stated that the EU would support the SKA because of its promise to greatly increase knowledge. However, he also urged the SKA project leaders to seek to win support from more countries.

To date, 19 countries (and 55 scientific institutions) have joined the project, and several more are likely to join soon, but it is currently expected that 80% of the cost will be carried by just nine countries.

The US will provide 40% of the total cost, while eight European countries - France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and the UK - will together bear another 40%.

(Because of different budgeting cycles, and because the funding is not needed all at once, the Europeans are likely to provide most of the funds at the start of construction and the US to provide most at the end.)

The general opinion among delegates was that the global recession would not harm the SKA. On the contrary, it was felt that the crisis has created a great opportunity for investment in advanced scientific infrastructure and expertise.

"The world's current and future challenges demand scientific thinkers and technological innovation," argued Professor John Womersley, Director of Science Programmes in the UK's Science and Technology Facilities Council, one of that country's seven national research councils. "The quickest way to get out of the economic dilemmas is to be able to evolve scientifically and that requires a scientifically trained workforce."

The decision on where to site the SKA will not be taken until 2011 or 2012, construction should start in 2013, with the instrument only achieving initial operating capability in 2016 at the earliest and it will be fully ready for operation only by 2021.

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