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Vuvuzelas for giant telescope

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Cape Town - South Africans should back the country's bid to host a giant radio telescope as enthusiastically as they did the Soccer World Cup, a top scientist said on Thursday.

South Africa and Australia are competing to host the multi-billion rand Square Kilometre Array, which will allow astronomers to peer back in time almost to the birth of the universe.

South African director of the SKA project Dr Bernie Fanaroff said in a statement that South Africa probably had a cost advantage.

It also had excellent legislation to protect the designated site outside Carnarvon in the Karoo from radio frequency interference.

"What will definitely improve our chances is to be able to show that South Africans are behind this bid, as they were in the Football World Cup bid," he said.

The announcement of the choice of site is expected between 2011 and 2012, and construction is scheduled to start in 2013.

Among the factors that will be taken into account in reaching the decision are radio frequency interference at each site, availability and cost of infrastructure, cost of construction and life-cycle costs.

'Unrivalled opportunity to invest in science'

Fanaroff's statement follows a series of meetings in Cape Town over the past two weeks of scientists involved in the SKA project, and on Wednesday, the annual SKA forum, attended also by politicians, business people and representatives of funding agencies.

According to the statement delegates to the forum felt the current world economic crisis "should not have a negative impact on the project".

It in fact presented an unrivalled opportunity to invest in science infrastructure and skills.

Countries which would recover best from the economic malaise were those which invested in the future.

According to computer giant IBM, once the SKA comes online, its computing power will be equal to all the people on the planet doing a billion calculations per second all at the same time.

