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SA submits strong bid to host SKA

Cape Town - Documents for South Africa's bid to host the Square Kilometre Array (SKA) have been submitted to the international SKA Siting Group.

The South African response to the group's request for information issued in June 2011 covers a range of information on the physical condition of the site in the Northern Cape province that was identified to host the SKA radio telescope.

The SKA will allow astronomers to see billions of years back in time with the telescopes using the science of radio interferometry, where several telescopes observe a single body and the data is combined to give a more accurate picture.

The South African bid team, which is in competition with Australia to host the SKA, is quietly confident about the success of the project.

"Quite honestly, I don't know what the Australians are proposing so I'm not in a position to say whether we're going to win or not. All I can say is we've put in a strong bid and I think we have a good chance," SA SKA project director Dr Bernie Fanaroff told News24.

Bid documents

The department of science and technology which is leading the South African bid, is in partnership with several African countries and a variety of companies to ensure the bid's success.

"Our bid is a strong, cost-effective and robust proposal for building the Square Kilometre Array in Africa. Our site is orders of magnitude better than any existing observatory and is protected by the Astronomy Geographic Advantage Act," said Science and Technology Minister Naledi Pandor.

An independent SKA Science Advisory Committee will evaluate the bid documents which represent eight years of work and decide whether the bid will be awarded to South Africa or Australia, which has partnered with New Zealand.

The South African bid has undergone engineering refinements to ensure that the project will be sustainable in the desert environment.

"The designs we've done are very cost-effective and robust," said Fanaroff.

The South African team has been working on technology to process the digital signals for the MeerKAT (Karoo Array Telescope), but the technology for the SKA remains a daunting and elusive challenge with current technology.

A final decision is expected by March 2012.