

Slump may impact on plans for telescope

THE global financial slump could adversely affect the erection in South Africa or anywhere else of a multi-billion rand radio telescope that could allow scientists to look back in time.

"What will happen with the international financial crisis, nobody knows. But it is a concern," the project's international director, Prof Richard Schilizzi, told a media briefing in Cape Town yesterday.

South Africa is competing with Australia to host the so-called Square Kilometre Array telescope which could give scientists a means of peering back in time almost to the birth of the universe.

Schilizzi said the project, to be bankrolled mainly by European and US government-funded agencies, would cost R19.5 billion

Almost R2 billion was being spent over five years on preliminary projects including perfecting system design and sorting out policy and organisational issues.

These should be resolved by 2012, which would allow the agencies to finalise the site and decide on funding.

He said the "first science" from the telescope should emerge by 2017.

The telescope consisting of up to 3 000 receiving dishes, each 12m to 15m across, would feed into what would "probably be the most powerful computer on the planet".

Schilizzi said if the project was awarded to South Africa, half of the dishes would be set up at a site outside Carnarvon in the Karoo, and the others in countries as far afield as Ghana and Mauritius.

The telescope, designed to pick up radio rather than light waves, would be 50 times more sensitive than any of its type yet built.

He said it would help scientists unravel the mysteries of the phenomenon known as "dark energy", the force that was driving the apparent acceleration of the expanding universe.

"We have absolutely no idea what it is," he said.

South Africa has already started work on the Meerkat project, designed as an array of 80 radio telescopes at Carnarvon that will serve as an experimental prototype for the full array.

South African project director Dr Bernie Fanaroff said Meerkat's first 12 metre diameter dish, made of a resin-fibreglass compound flame-sprayed with aluminium to provide a reflective surface, would probably be put up in April. - Sapa

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