



R10bn telescope bid on track

By Dave Glazier

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Science and technology minister Mosibudi Mangena was in the Northern Cape yesterday, showcasing the proposed site for the square kilometre array (SKA) telescope. The R10 billion project recently gained funding approval from the European Union.

SA is bidding against Australia, China and Argentina to host the radio telescope, which is believed to be the largest of its kind in the world.

The SKA will be a radio telescope with a planned collecting area of a square kilometre that will allow up to 100 astronomers to observe different areas of the sky simultaneously.

Nhlanhla Nyide, the science and technology department's chief director of communications, says private sector partners will be used for the deployment of the technological infrastructure related to the project. It is understood the proposed South African national research network will form a core component of the infrastructure.

Nyide says physical and technological infrastructure would have to be established in the Northern Cape site (which has been selected due to its low levels of radio interference) if SA is the winning bidder.

"We should have the first indications [of which country has won] by the end of 2006 – but the likelihood is that firm confirmation will happen in about 2009," he explains.

Advantages

Nyide believes SA's strongest competitive advantage over the other three nations lies in the commitment government has towards the project.

"SA has the full backing of the government – some of the other countries have only the support of the private sector."

A comprehensive bid document was submitted to the independent international site selection committee (a panel of experts from across the globe) in December 2005, followed by a detailed radio frequency interference report in March 2006.

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