

SA and Australasia may have to 'share' SKA

Allafrica.com reports that - following a decision last week to delay an announcement on where the Square Kilometre Array (SKA) will ultimately be based - speculation is growing that SA and Australia may have to join forces in building and operating the world's most powerful radio telescope.

Both countries had previously been asked to submit separate bids for the telescope, which is likely to cost at least \$US2 billion, and whose 3,000 receptors have been designed to make the telescope 50 times more sensitive to radio waves than any existing facility.

The SKA Organisation - the international consortium responsible for the project - had been due to announce which bid had been successful last week, but at the end of a two-day meeting in the Netherlands, it issued a statement saying that its members had recognised that it was "desirable to maintain an inclusive approach." The statement added that the members considered it to be "important to maximise the value from the investments made by both candidate host regions". As a result, a small scientific working group has been set up "to explore possible implementation options that would achieve this".

Scientists hope the telescope will help answer fundamental questions about the universe, including its origin and evolution, and whether it contains life beyond our planet. One possibility raised is that receptors built in South Africa, Australia and New Zealand - which is a partner to the Australian bid - might be programmed to operate jointly. According to Allafrica.com other commentators question whether the two sets of receptors can look at the same part of the sky simultaneously, given that Australia and South Africa are on opposite sides of the Southern hemisphere. A final decision on the choice of the site is now due to be announced next month.

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