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## European Budget Snafu Could Delay Progress on Fusion Reactor

by Daniel Clery on 17 November 2010, 10:55 AM | [Permanent Link](#) | [0 Comments](#)

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Progress on the international ITER fusion reactor could be slowed by an impasse over the 2011 budget of the European Union. On Monday, the E.U. Council of Ministers (representing the 27 member governments) and the European Parliament (directly elected by European citizens) missed a deadline, an action that restarts the clock on budget negotiations. Missing another end-of-the-year deadline would push the 2010 budget into 2011, a step that could destroy a carefully constructed rescue package for the E.U.'s share of ITER's much-inflated cost.

Construction began this year at the ITER site in Cadarache, southern France, with the goal of powering up the reactor in 2019. ITER aims to show that nuclear fusion, the power of the sun, can be harnessed as an energy source on Earth. But since the seven international partners involved—China, the European Union, India, Japan, South Korea, Russia, and the United States—agreed to go ahead with the project in 2005, its estimated price tag has more than doubled to about €16 billion.

The European Union, as host, is responsible for 45% of the cost. But its current funding cycle for research, which runs until the end of 2013, would leave ITER €1.4 billion short during the final 2 years. In July, negotiators agreed to make up the missing funding by taking €460 million from other research areas and €940 million from other budget lines that had underspent in 2010. Based on that agreement, the seven ITER partners finally gave the [go-ahead](#) to the project's detailed construction plan, known as its baseline.

But political wrangling between the Council of Ministers and the Parliament could kill that carefully crafted plan. The original 2011 E.U. budget projected a funding increase of 6%, but many E.U. nations now want to limit the increase to 2.9%. Last month the two bodies entered a 21-day conciliation period, during which parliamentarians agreed upon 2.9% but asked to be more involved in funding discussions, including the possibility of pursuing "other sources of funding." That phrase is code for a directly levied E.U.-wide tax, something that member states oppose.

Three member states—the Netherlands, Sweden, and the United Kingdom—refused to embrace the idea, however, and the 21-day window closed on Monday night with no agreement. The European Commission, the E.U.'s executive body, must now work out a new budget proposal, which must then go through the approval procedure again. If that too fails, the 2010 budget will roll over into 2011 and be distributed in equal parts each month.

That allocation won't cause a cash crisis for ITER in 2011, but it may still have an impact. "There are investments to be made and contractors to pay, and it is very unlikely that these will be able to be spread equally over several months," says the commission's budget spokesperson, Patrizio Fiorilli.

A potentially more serious problem is covering the €1.4 billion shortfall. If the 2011 budget is scrapped, then so, too, is the plan to close the shortfall. And there's worse: "If there is no agreement for next year's budget, [the 2010 underspending] cannot be used; that amount will go back to member states (as stated by the [Lisbon] Treaty) as surplus and ITER will lose it," Fiorilli says.

With ITER's schedule on the line, fusion scientists across the globe will be watching anxiously in the weeks ahead as politicians in Brussels once again argue over budgets.

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