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MEPs concerned over ITER funding

By Constant Brand

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Budgets committee fears extra €1.3bn will not be enough to cover construction costs of fusion reactor.

MEPs on the European Parliament's budgets committee doubt whether a proposed €1.3 billion in extra funding for 2012-13 for the ITER international experimental fusion reactor will be enough to cover construction costs.

Jens Geier, a German centre-left MEP who was among 13 MEPs that visited the ITER construction site in Cadarache, southern France, on 16-18 May, warned that the costs would increase dramatically. The joint delegation of the budgets and budgetary control committees went to France to assess what the extra funds would be spent on. Preliminary conclusions recommended that funds should be released only if MEPs are regularly updated on progress and given full access to internal audit documents.

The budgets committee has so far refused to support an extra €1.3bn in spending between 2012-13, which was agreed by member states and the Commission last year to cover the EU's increased contribution towards ITER's construction costs. MEPs oppose the European Commission's plan to shift money from other research projects or from the Common Agricultural Policy budget. The Commission last month presented the same proposal to MEPs again as part of its proposed 2012 EU budget in the hope of winning a reconsideration.

Stress tests

Geier told the committee on Monday (23 May) that he had learnt during meetings in France that the ITER site would have to participate in the EU-wide nuclear reactor safety "stress tests"; ensuring the reactor is built to withstand earthquakes and other disasters could require more funds. He added that delivery of parts would be interrupted by Japan's earthquake and raw materials prices are rising. "That could undermine the project," he said.

According to Anne Jensen, a Danish Liberal MEP who co-chaired the delegation, the committee is under pressure from the Commission and member states to decide on the new funding plan before the end of July. She said that Commission officials were warning of the dismissal of engineers working on the Joint European Torus (JET) project in the UK, closely linked to the ITER programme, if no agreement was reached.

Since ITER was launched in 2007 by the EU, China, India, Japan, Russia, South Korea and the US, the costs of the project have soared. The EU's contribution to ITER has jumped to €7.2bn, from a forecast €2.7bn in 2001. But the Council has said the EU's contribution would be capped at €6.6bn for the period 2007-2020 to promote cost savings in the project. The increased costs have been blamed on construction delays.

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