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## European Union Ministers: No New Money for Giant Fusion Reactor

 by [Daniel Clery](#) on July 13, 2010 10:07 AM | [Permanent Link](#) | [0 Comments](#)
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In a decision that may threaten funding for other European science efforts, the European Union's 27 member states look set this week to formally decline a request from the European Commission, the union's executive body, to provide extra money to cover cost overruns for the €16 billion ITER fusion reactor project. The commission must now figure out how to find the extra money from within its own budget and get approval for those changes, a tall order in a region already reeling from the global financial crisis.

ITER, which is poised to begin construction at the reactor site in southern France, has yet to gain final approval for its design, schedule, and cost, collectively known as the project's baseline. The E.U., as host to the project, must pay roughly 45% of the total price tag. But as cost estimates have spiraled since the project began in 2007, the E.U. has stalled on approving the baseline while it figures out how it is going to pay for ITER. At the beginning of May, the commission [revealed](#) that its share of ITER construction costs had ballooned from €2.7 billion to €7.2 billion and that its current fusion funding, which runs to 2013, is short by €1.4 billion.

The commission asked E.U. member states to provide the extra cash to ensure the future of the project, but at the end of May the states instead [set up](#) a panel to find a solution. That group reported its conclusions at the end of June, and last week the Council of Ministers, which represents the member states, drew up a plan, a copy of which has been seen by *Science*. It stipulates that cost savings must be made to bring down Europe's contribution to €6.6 billion and the 2013 overspend should be covered from within the commission's existing budget, in particular from the same budget line that includes the [Framework 7 research program](#) and Europe 2020, the commission's 10-year strategy to revive the E.U. economy. The council says any unused appropriations in that budget line should be co-opted first, and then a flat-rate reduction should be applied to all funded projects. Once this is done, the council says, the commission should go ahead and approve the ITER baseline at the next ITER council meeting on 26-27 July.

In a response also seen by *Science*, the commission says that the council's proposals "would not resolve the long-term financing problems of ITER." The commission went on to say that it "reserves its position concerning the approval of the project baseline as well as its right to make more appropriate proposals to the budgetary authority." That budgetary authority, which must sign off on any changes to the budget, is the Council of Ministers and the European Parliament, and the latter, according to a source in the commission, is very unlikely to approve a raiding of the budget for ITER.

Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) echo that sentiment. Rebecca Harms, an MEP representing Germany's Green Party, says taking money from this budget line would "collapse a part of this [Europe 2020] sustainability strategy and the next Framework program." If such a proposal comes before Parliament, she says, "I will organize a battle against it." Herbert Reul, a German Christian Democrat MEP and chair of the Parliament's Industry, Research and Energy Committee, agrees that "it would surely not be an option to cut funds from other important programs." But he thinks some sort of compromise is achievable. "We will have to check where reserves could be made available and explore how much member states would be willing to contribute. The large gap can surely not be bridged with just one single source of funding."

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