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EU says still plans to start fusion project 2005

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LUXEMBOURG (Reuters) - The European Union plans to start construction of a nuclear fusion reactor known as ITER before the end of the year despite ongoing negotiations with Japan over the site's location, an EU official said on Tuesday.

"Yes, it is still the plan," said Janez Potocnik, European Commissioner for science and research, when asked whether construction would start this year.

"I believe we can remain optimistic on this issue," he said about reaching a deal on where to locate ITER.

Japan and France are battling to host the 10 billion euro (\$12.51 billion) reactor, which is also backed by the United States, China, South Korea, and Russia.

Ministerial level representatives of the partners in the project will meet in Russia before the end of this month when an announcement could be made, coinciding with the deadline the EU set itself for a political agreement.

"We believe we are still very much in line with the possibility of reaching agreement at the end of this month," Potocnik said.

The project known as ITER, the Latin word for "the way," aims to mimic the way the sun produces energy, potentially providing an inexhaustible source of low-cost energy using seawater as fuel.

Japanese newspaper Yomiuri Shimbun reported last month that under a deal struck between the two countries, Japan would be given the post of secretary-general at the headquarters of the project and the right to build related research facilities, if it agreed France should host the main reactor.

The host country will shoulder 50 percent of the construction and operational costs, while the other country will pay 10 percent and provide 20 percent of the necessary personnel, the report said.

France wants to construct the plant at Cadarache, in the south of the country, while Japan has been campaigning for its own site at Rokkasho, near the northern tip of the main island.

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