

ITER

Cadarache: More Than Just a Candidate Site

CAMBRIDGE, U.K.—Government ministers from the 25 European Union (E.U.) countries declared last week that they want to keep negotiating with the other five partners in the international effort to build a \$6 billion fusion reactor. But the one thing that is not up for negotiation, they say, is the site.



Here we stand. E.U. ministers expect ITER to be built at this site in Cadarache, France.

That message was contained in the new instructions they gave to the European Commission, the E.U.'s executive arm: It declared that the southern French town of Cadarache is no longer Europe's *candidate* site for the International Thermonuclear Experimental

Reactor (ITER), but instead it is *the* site. The six ITER partners have been arguing for a year over whether to locate the reactor in Japan or France. All that remains to be decided, E.U. leaders say, is how many of the six partners will remain on board.

Scientists hope ITER will show that fusing deuterium and tritium in a sustained reaction can produce more power than the reactor consumes and so form a viable new source of energy. An international consortium spent nearly 15 years designing ITER, but the current partners—China, the E.U., Japan, Korea, Russia, and the United States—are divided on whether to build at Cadarache or at the Japanese site at Rokkasho.

The statement that came out of last week's council of ministers seemed less confrontational than other recent comments. After a council meeting in September, observers hinted that the E.U. was ready to press ahead without an agreement (*Science*, 1 October, p. 26). And when E.U. officials suggested that Japan was ready to concede before a meeting of ITER partners last month, Japanese negotiators were furious (*Science*, 19 November, p. 1271). E.U. offi-

cials "misread the signs coming from Japan," says a senior European fusion researcher. As a result, last week's statement did not mention ultimatums or deadlines but instead called for a project involving "all six parties currently negotiating."

This more diplomatic stance won praise from the Japanese. "We appreciate that [the E.U.] now reaffirmed the importance of the six-party framework. There is no mention of unilateral action; that is quite good," says Satoru Ohtake, head of the Office of Fusion Energy at Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology.

The ministers showed no flexibility, however, on the site. In return for Cadarache, they offered Japan the role of "privileged partner," meaning that Japan would receive more than its share of industrial contracts for ITER components and could choose the ITER director general and have its pick of the extra facilities that have been bolted onto the project to speed the transition to commercial power generation. This could include a materials testing center, a supercomputer lab for fusion simulations, or a beefing up of Japan's own JT-60 fusion reactor.

Members of the European fusion community argue that Cadarache has a clear advantage on scientific grounds. They note that Europe is home to the world's largest fusion reactor, the Joint European Torus near Oxford, U.K., and that it has the largest fusion research program in the world, equal to that of the United States and Japan put together. The decision may be overdue, but for the sake of decorum, the E.U. ministers seem prepared to wait a little while longer. —**DANIEL CLERY**
With reporting from Dennis Normile in Tokyo.

SCIENCE POLICY

Europe Advances a Plan for Merit-Based Funding

PARIS—The European Research Council (ERC)—a new funding agency that would support basic research based solely on quality—inched closer to reality at a meeting of the European Union's (E.U.'s) science, education, and industry ministers in Brussels last week. All but two of the E.U.'s 25 member countries support the idea and have asked the European Commission to work out a proposal.

The ERC, a brainchild of Europe's scientific organizations, has quickly gained popularity over the past 2 years among researchers and politicians alike. It would be created as part of Framework Programme 7, the E.U.'s science funding round for the period 2007–10. In early November, it got a new high-level nod of approval from an expert group led by former Dutch prime minister Wim Kok; his panel backed the ERC in a report about the lack of progress on the Lisbon strategy, Europe's plan to reinvigorate its economy.

The Dutch government, which currently holds the rotating presidency of the E.U., had hoped that last week's meeting of the council of ministers would result in a formal invitation to the European Commission to come up with a plan. But Italy and Poland refused to go along. The Italian government objected to the ERC, as it explained in an earlier statement, in part because the agency's merit reviews might lead to some grants being awarded to groups from just one country, which Italy says violates E.U. principles. Poland, for its part, is worried that it may lose out in the competition for ERC funds. The lack of unanimity was "quite disappointing," says Peter Nijkamp, head of the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research, who, along with the Dutch government, had invested a lot of time trying to win over the Italian government.

But Jose Mariano Gago, who chairs the Initiative for Science in Europe, a lobby

group created to promote the ERC, says unanimity at this point would be too much to expect; he says he's very pleased with the outcome. The meeting's conclusions, although not shared by all, send a "strong positive message," he says, adding that European Commissioner Janez Potočnik now knows he has the backing of the vast majority of countries to come up with a plan.

Meanwhile, the Italian government has come under attack from its own scientists for opposing the ERC. The Italian Academy of Sciences issued a position paper supporting the ERC last month, pointing out that it had not been consulted on the matter and calling the government's position "dangerous for the prestige of the Italian scientists in Europe." In addition, more than 2200 scientists have signed an online petition in favor of the ERC launched by an association of young researchers. —**MARTIN ENSERINK**