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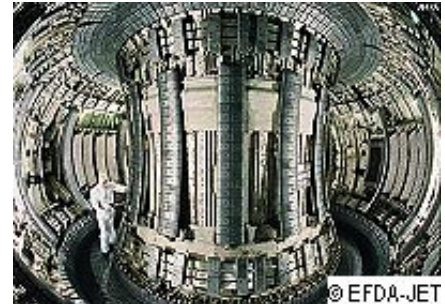
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US to pin its nuclear fusion hopes on ITER

[Date: 2004-08-02]

Despite continuing international deadlock over where to base the international thermonuclear experimental reactor (ITER), the United States' Department of Energy (DOE) is set to cancel work on a six year old national nuclear fusion project.

Since 1998, when the US Congress called on the DOE to pull out of the ITER project, a team of around 50 researchers has been working on a project known as FIRE (fusion ignition research experiment). Shortly before rejoining ITER, in 2002, the DOE set a deadline of July 2004 to decide whether to proceed with FIRE if negotiations over ITER stalled.



'If ITER does not move forward, then FIRE should be advanced as a US based burning plasma experiment with strong encouragement of international participation,' the DOE had said.

Now, however, the department appears reluctant to proceed with its own project, despite for the first time expressing serious concerns that ITER may fall through. Anne Davies, director of the DOE's office of fusion energy sciences, told New Scientist: 'We do not have a backup plan. We are focused on making ITER work. If ITER doesn't work, we are going to have a lot of reassessing to do.'

The department's reluctance to continue with FIRE stems from the fact that its design is based on the use of copper magnets, rather than the superconducting magnets proposed for ITER, which Ms Davies described as 'dead-end technology'. She also believes that without international cooperation, it would be hard to convince Congress to approve the one billion euro budget needed to build FIRE.

However, there are those in the US who believe that given the current impasse over ITER, it is too early to make a decision on FIRE. The US National Research Council's burning plasma assessment committee has argued that: '[It] is important to recognize that the ITER negotiations could be unsuccessful, and reasonable contingency planning for that eventuality is prudent until a decision on ITER is reached.'

And while FIRE's design team leader Dale Meade believes that the DOE should 'push hard to get a favourable decision to construct ITER', he has also urged the US government to delay its decision to abandon the backup project. 'Don't go back to square one again on US fusion strategy,' Dr Meade urged.

For further information on ITER, please consult the following web address:
<http://www.iter.org/>

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Document Reference: Based on information from press sources (New Scientist) and the US Department of Energy**Subject Index :** Nuclear Fusion; Scientific Research; Coordination, Cooperation