

Oettinger aims to get ITER back on track

By Dave Keating - Today, 05:15 CET

Günther Oettinger, European commissioner for energy, has summoned representatives of the seven countries investing in the ITER nuclear-fusion project for a meeting on Friday (6 September) to discuss the project's continuing financing and its organisational woes.

The EU and its member states contribute more than 45% of the project's funding, with the remainder coming from Russia, China, India, Japan, South Korea and the United States. The project has been plagued by cost rises and long delays since it was set up in 2006.

ITER's funding became a political football during EU budget negotiations in 2011. The EU's commitment to the project faced a €1.4bn funding shortfall in the 2012-13 period and the situation was resolved only when money was taken from other budget items, including administration and natural resources. The item will instead come from member states' budgets in the long-term 2014-20 multiannual financial framework (MFF).

Holy grail

Fusion has often been described as the 'holy grail' of nuclear energy because it does not present the same safety and environmental risks as nuclear fission. But some environmental campaigners say the money being thrown at what could be a doomed project would be better spent on renewable energy. Experts predict that a commercially-available fusion reactor will not exist for another 50 years. The estimated total cost of the project is now €15 billion.

Another focus of the meeting, which will take place at the ITER headquarters at Saint Paul lez Durance, in the south of France, will be the project's organisational structure. Contributions are made in kind through the procurement of components by individual national agencies, a process that has been described as bureaucratic and cumbersome.

A recent report by Ernst & Young for the European Parliament's budgetary control committee found that the existing organisational structure was partly responsible for the cost overruns.