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Science Minister confident SA can host €1bn SKA, and demonstration project gets under way

Minister of Science and Technology Mosibudi Mangena was confidenct of South Africa's ability to develop and exploit the planned international Square Kilometre Array (SKA) radio telescope to its maximum.

He was speaking at the Hartebeeshoek radio astronomy observatory, where he officially opened the construction site for the prototype dish of South Africa's Karoo Array Telescope (Kat).

The prototype dish will be 15 m in diameter and 20 m high and will be made up of composite materials.

"South Africa has the engineering and design skills to ensure that this dish is a proudly South African product," said the Minister.

"Kat will be an extremely exciting development, capable of carrying out leading-edge science," he highlights.

"This will be one of the best telescopes in the world," affirms Kat project manager Anita Loots.

"We are pretty sure we'll be the only reasonable option for the SKA," she stated.

The prototype dish for Kat has to be finished by the middle of next year, after which the computing and digital signal processing components will be added.

The prototype dish will also be used as an operational radio telescope.

Kat is planned to comprise 20 dishes, which will be located in the Karoo, in the district of the town of Carnavon, in the Northern Cape province.

The project has to be fully commissioned by 2009 and is intended to serve as a pre-cursor to the much larger SKA.

The Kat will serve to display this country's ability to host and build such a large telescope.

Recently, South Africa and Australia were announced as the two countries on the short list for hosting the SKA.

The SKA will cost about a €1-billion and the Kat about R350-million, plus another R150-million for infrastructure.

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