

Australia and NZealand join in super telescope bid

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A large galaxy in Andromeda is seen in this file photo, provided by NASA. Australia and New Zealand announced a joint bid on Friday for a giant radio telescope project which will reach for the earliest traces of the universe in a search for intelligent life.

Australia and New Zealand announced a joint bid Friday for a giant radio telescope project which will reach for the earliest traces of the universe in a search for intelligent life.

The Pacific neighbours said their joint 2.5 billion dollar (2.1 billion US) bid was one of two on the shortlist for the international Square Kilometre Array (SKA), a project which will use 4,000 telescopes as a

single device to tap into deep space.

"The SKA project promises to be a top global science project of the 21st century, using one of the world's most powerful computers to explore fundamental questions in science," said New Zealand Economic Development Minister Gerry Brownlee.

The array, which will be able to see back to the formation of the first stars, was one of the world's most significant "mega-science" projects, said Brownlee, who signed the formal agreement in Sydney on Friday.

Australia's Science Minister Kim Carr said the joint bid proposed erecting 4,000 antennas that would stretch 5,000 kilometres from Australia's west coast to New Zealand, and described the trans-Tasman involvement as "crucial".

A final decision on whether Australia and [New Zealand](#) or rival bidder South Africa will host the SKA will be made in 2012, and construction will take between six and eight years, the ministers said.

[Australia](#) has already outbid Argentina, China and the United States to make the final two.

A global consortium involving more than 50 institutions from 19 countries was driving the SKA programme, and finance for the project was expected to come from international partner governments, they added.

The SKA would be 10,000 times more powerful than current instruments and would aim to answer fundamental questions about the universe, including whether there was intelligent life beyond Earth and what happened after the Big Bang.

It would also explore questions of gravity and magnetism, and how galaxies were born and evolved against the backdrop of "dark energy" that fills the universe, the ministers said.

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