

Australia to purchase powerful Antarctic icebreaker

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Australia said Monday it will spend hundreds of millions of dollars on a new icebreaker ship to bolster its claim over large areas of Antarctica and replace an ageing vessel.

Environment Minister Greg Hunt said two Europe-based firms had been shortlisted to build the vessel in what would be the largest single investment in Australia's Antarctic research and logistics history.

"It will be an investment of hundreds and hundreds of millions of dollars," he told reporters in Hobart, adding that he would not comment further on the cost due to an ongoing tender process.

"It should be delivered by 2019."

Hunt said Australia's current icebreaker, Aurora Australis, was ageing and its replacement would be based in Hobart, on the southern island of Tasmania, in a bid to make the city the gateway to Antarctica.

"It is absolutely critical under international law for Australia to maintain an active presence in Antarctica so as to maintain our claims," he said.

"We have about 42 percent of the Antarctic land mass which is covered by Australian claims and if we were to abandon that... then that would be a deeply irresponsible action for future generations."

Several countries have territorial claims on Antarctica, viewed as a

potential future source of huge mineral resources, although under a 1949 agreement the frozen continent is designated a scientific preserve.

Mining is banned until there until 2048 at the earliest under the Antarctic Treaty.

The new icebreaker will be able to conduct deep-sea Southern Ocean research and sea-ice experiments, as well as deliver critical fuel and cargo to Australia's Antarctic stations.

Its key feature will be the capability to break through 1.65 metres of ice whilst maintaining a speed of three knots.

Launched in 1989, the Aurora Australis has a limit of 1.23 metres and has struggled to break through thick ice in recent seasons. A Chinese icebreaker was called in to help free a Russian ship stuck in Antarctic ice in December.

The new ship will also have a cargo capacity of at least 1,200 tonnes, up from 890 tonnes on the Aurora Australis.

"This will be the envy of the Antarctic world, and so as a consequence of that, other countries are looking at working with Australia," Hunt said.

"What we want to see here in Hobart is, whether it's China or India or South Korea, whether it's Japan or Italy or France, inviting them in to base themselves here, so as Hobart is the logistic centre."

Australia has three Antarctic and one sub-Antarctic stations and maintains an air link between Hobart and the Wilkins ice runway near Casey station, just outside the Antarctic Circle.

Canberra is expected to announce a long-term strategy for Australia's

presence in Antarctica later in the year.

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