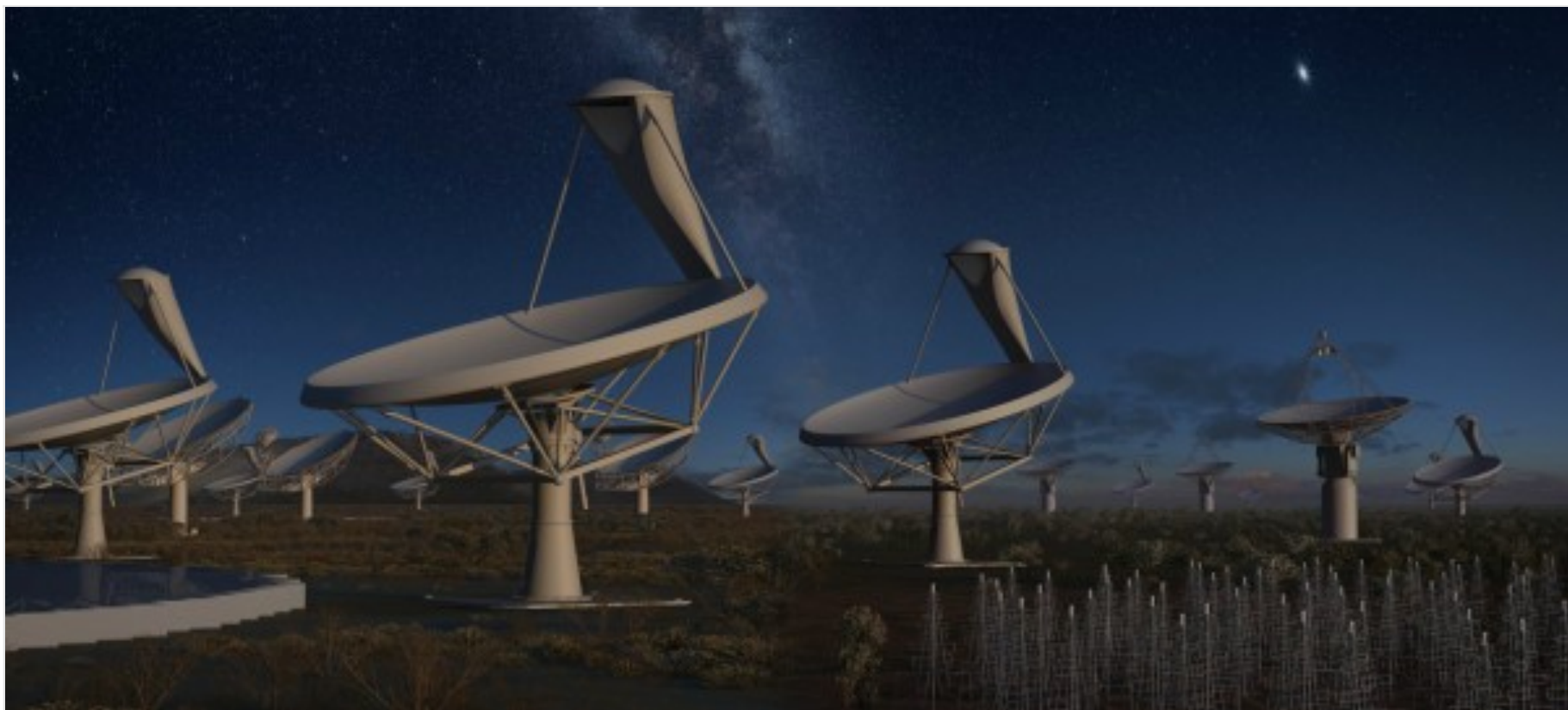


Germany Bows Out of Radioastronomy Megaproject



Shocking its partners, Germany has withdrawn from an international collaboration to build the €2 billion Square Kilometre Array (SKA), the world's biggest radio telescope. Germany's federal science ministry has informed the U.K.-based SKA Organisation that it intends to end its participation at the end of June 2015. "It came out of the blue. We were not expecting Germany to be withdrawing," says SKA Director General Philip Diamond.

SKA will create a [single huge telescope](#) from thousands of individual dishes and antennas across southern Africa and Australia with the aim of testing relativity, studying galactic evolution, and peering back to the era of the very first stars and galaxies. Construction could begin as early as 2017. Twenty countries are supporting the design effort with more than €120 million; according to a [statement](#) from the SKA Organisation, Germany's contribution so far has been small—just €3.8 million—so its withdrawal will not be a huge blow to the project. But the impact on Germany's astronomy community will be "catastrophic" if the nation doesn't reconsider, asserts Michael Kramer, director of the Max Planck Institute for Radio Astronomy in Bonn.

Although Germany hadn't ponied up much cash, financial priorities appear to be the reason for its withdrawal. "SKA Organisation regrets this decision, and understands it is driven by difficult national financial circumstances around the funding of large research infrastructures in Germany and Europe," the SKA statement said. Germany did not spell out the cause of the financial pressure, but the country is in the process of building two large international facilities on its territory: the European XFEL x-ray laser facility and FAIR, an accelerator center for nuclear physics.

According to the SKA Organisation, German institutions, scientists, and companies will continue to participate in the design working groups, but German companies will not be able to bid for construction contracts, and German scientists will have limited opportunities to use the telescope.

Kramer says that he is training many young scientists with ambitions to work on SKA. “It will be a real shame if they are not able to exploit it,” he says. “We need to be clear to our partners that this is not a decision reflecting on the science or quality of the SKA project,” says Kramer, who adds that the government decided to withdraw without consulting the astronomy community. A government representative was not available for comment because today is a holiday in Germany.

Bernie Fanaroff, director of South Africa’s SKA effort, [told the country’s *Mail & Guardian* newspaper](#) today: “I don’t think we should write off Germany in the long run.” Kramer hopes that’s the case. “SKA will be a fundamental part of exploring the cosmos,” he says. “I want Germany to be part of it.”