

plan would require the 27 EU member states to pay into a GMES fund, with contributions calculated pro rata according to each state's gross national income. Parallel proposals for a change to ITER's funding mechanism are expected on 13 December.

#### ON THE CUSP OF REALITY

The timing of the commission's proposals could hardly be worse for GMES, whose organizers plan to start launching its satellite fleet in 2013. "Europe, for once, has taken [world] leadership to develop a very comprehensive Earth-observation system, with multiple satellites and instruments at the technological cutting edge," says Josef Aschbacher, the head of GMES at ESA, based in Frascati, Italy. "We are now on the cusp of making this a reality."

He notes that the project has an exemplary record of staying on budget, even during its long and financially risky research and development phase. Once the satellites enter into operation in 2014, costs will become much more predictable and easier to control. But "we cannot launch the satellites if we have no guarantee that the operational funding and governance structure will be in place afterwards", Aschbacher says.

A new funding mechanism would require unanimous agreement among the EU member states and could take at least five years to

establish, he adds, posing a serious setback for the project or killing it altogether.

Aschbacher says that he is now "very concerned" for GMES's future, and notes that a working document accompanying the commission's budget proposals seemed to contradict the proposals, concluding that taking GMES out of the main EU budget entirely

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before the programme was firmly established would "create high uncertainty for GMES" and "more than likely ... mean a discontinuation of GMES". Some observers speculate that the commission is using this potential threat to GMES as a bargaining chip to win concessions from member states on other issues, and that, ultimately, a compromise solution to its funding will be hammered out.

#### CREATIVE ACCOUNTING

Meanwhile, ITER's financial problems are much more pressing. As part of general budget negotiations in November, ITER was thrown an extra €100 million for next year, but efforts to find the remaining €1.2 billion to cover cost overruns have failed.

On 23 November, a 'trilogue' of the council, commission and parliament could not agree on a commission proposal to scrape the money together from other parts of the EU budget. It suggested transferring €300 million from the Framework research budget; €600 million from the agriculture budget; €240 million from the EU administration budget; and €25 million from the justice, home affairs and education budget.

The result was a stalemate, so another trilogue will be held on 1 December. One source close to the negotiations says he is "cautiously optimistic" that a solution will be found at this meeting. If not, says Michel Claessens, a spokesman for ITER, there will be "significant delays" to the construction of "nearly all the buildings of the ITER site". ■

#### CLARIFICATION

The News story 'Summit urged to clean up farming' (*Nature* **479**, 279; 2011) relied on a draft report supplied by the Commission on Sustainable Agriculture and Climate Change that stated that agriculture is the "single largest contributor to greenhouse-gas pollution". The final version of the report states that agriculture is "a significant contributor to greenhouse gas emissions".