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SA space science, astronomy set to bring in billions: Mangena

PARLIAMENT – South Africa's remarkable progress over the past decade in the fields of space science and astronomy is set to generate billions of rands in foreign investment, Science and Technology Minister Mosibudi Mangena told MPs on Friday.

Opening debate on his department's budget vote in the National Assembly, he said the country was poised to take the lead in African space and astronomy programmes through the establishment of a South African Space Agency.

"We are establishing (this) to unite the work of several institutions and harness these capacities to leverage billions of rands through which we hope to boost the economy and create more jobs.

"We plan to obtain Cabinet approval to formalise this new partnership later in the year," Mangena said.

South Africa's second satellite would be launched this year.

"This is a R26 million project that will expand our satellite-engineering capabilities... We are doing this at a time when both Algeria and Nigeria have procured such micro-satellites, and are discussing with us a programme to develop a cluster of satellites."

The cluster would be know as the African Resource Management Constellation.

"The vision is to develop and build in Africa satellites that can assist in disaster prediction and mitigation, projection of crop yields, and a host of other applications. Other industrial applications are likely to spin off from this process."

South Africa had also signed bilateral agreements with the Russian Space Agency, "which has expressed an interest in launching satellites from (here)".

It had also signed partnership and co-operation agreements with the European Space Agency and NASA (National Aeronautics and Space Administration) in the United States.

Mangena said the world's astronomers had "discovered" South Africa's top-notch resources, and the country was now seen as a strategic provider and developer of next-generation, ground-based observation facilities.

On the bid to host the US$1.5 billion international Square Kilometre Array (SKA) radio telescope, he said if this was successful it would translate "into foreign investment of R9 billion, with a spin-off of major contracts for engineering companies in South Africa".

Once completed, the SKA will be the largest radio telescope in the world. Should South Africa's bid be successful, the core of the device will be built in the Northern Cape.

Other major astronomy projects established in southern and South Africa over the past decade include the South African Large Telescope (SALT), the most powerful optical telescope in the southern hemisphere, and Namibia's High-Energy Stereoscopic System (HESS) observatory, the most powerful cosmic ray instrument in the world.

Mangena said these and other projects should not be seen as an indulgence, but as an imperative. They provided a training ground for young South African scientists.

“Working in these areas provides an excellent long-term platform that we hope to use as a training ground for our young scientists in the area of mathematical and computational modelling,” he said. – Sapa.