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Nobel winners make a pitch for mega lab

About a dozen top scientists from across the world, including two Physics Nobel Prize winners, have written to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh urging him to clear a proposed underground neutrino laboratory, billed as one of the most ambitious projects in the history of Indian science.

The scientists said that, with the India-based Neutrino Observatory (INO) delayed by more than two years, the U.S. and China are thinking of building similar facilities.

As with the large hadron collider in Geneva, which will re-create the Big Bang that created the universe, there is huge international interest in this project, being coordinated by Mumbai's Tata Institute of Fundamental Research (TIFR), because neutrinos are a hot topic in science.

Experiments already indicate that these elementary particles have properties that might force physicists to recast existing theories.

Produced by cosmic rays in the earth's atmosphere, neutrinos are key to understanding how the universe evolved and how the sun and other stars generate energy.

"Any further delay will be detrimental to the success of the whole project," said the scientists in a letter dated August 7, of which HT has a copy.

"INO will bring more science to India and enhance India's role as an important player in front-line science. Time is running out and the competitive edge that INO had is slipping away."

Construction was supposed to have begun in 2007, but the Tamil Nadu government has still not given the site environment and forest clearances.

For two weeks, HT phoned and sent several text messages to Environment Minister Jairam Ramesh and Science and Technology Minister Prithviraj Chavan, but they did not respond to our queries. Tamil Nadu's environment and forest secretaries declined to comment.

"The world will not wait for us," said Professor Naba Mondal, INO spokesperson at TIFR. "Moreover, it's important for the revival of basic science in the country."

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