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Large Hadron Collider delayed

Scientists happy with extra time to tweak their instruments.

Katharine Sanderson

The particle-smashing project designed to look for the mysterious particle that gives objects mass will not be seeing any live action this year.

The Large Hadron Collider (LHC), based at CERN in Geneva, Switzerland, was due to do a trial run in November this year, before switching on the scientific search for the Higgs boson in 2008. The test run would have seen a proton beam passing through the accelerator without actually being accelerated. But a number of setbacks — not least the spectacular failure earlier this year of some of the LHC's critical magnets — have led to a reassessment of the schedule, and the cancellation of the test run.

The news is not yet official, but is "probably true" according to CERN spokesman James Gillies. No formal announcement will be made until CERN's council next meets on 22 June, he says.

The delay doesn't come as a huge surprise, says Lyndon Evans, project manager at the LHC. "I've been making it pretty clear for a while we will not be ready to do this engineering run," he says.

Nor is it all bad news. The scientists who will be performing their search for the Higgs boson when the machine is finally up and running next year are perfectly happy with the cancellation of the engineering test, Evans claims. During the test run the instruments would have been off-limits for the scientists, putting more pressure on an already tight schedule. This way they can continue to work on them.

The down side is that in April or May 2008, when the science does start, there will have been no chance to see if there were any glitches in getting a full beam. "The purpose of the engineering run was to have an early warning of any problems," says Evans. "I would have preferred to have a beam in the machine."

But the test is by no means critical. And by the time all the instrumentation and hardware has been installed it will be well worth turning the beam on full and

By the time the LHC beam turns on it will collect data straight away.

CERN

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collecting data, they say — even if it isn't running perfectly. They will have just missed out on a ribbon-cutting ceremony for 2007.

There is still a possibility that a portion of the particle accelerator will be tested this year — the proton beam may be turned on, but not accelerated, in just one section of the LHC. But even that is looking unlikely, especially if running the test means the final switch-on date has to be pushed back. "It is getting so close to our start-up time that the sector test becomes marginal," says Evans. "We will do nothing to delay our final goal."

In the meantime, there is a chance that a competing US instrument at Fermilab might spot the Higgs boson before the LHC turns on.

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