



Dampier charts course for growth

Dampier Port Authority is on course to claim back its title of Australia's biggest tonnage port with annual exports figures expected to tip 128.5 million tonnes.

Berthing more than 3100 vessels each year, or about nine ships a day, Dampier Port has reaffirmed its position as the Pilbara's major shipping vein.

Channelling precious cargo from the heart of the resources boom to overseas markets, throughput at the busy port has nearly doubled since the early 90s.

And with plenty of room to grow, the port is only operating at half vessel capacity. Dampier Port Authority chief executive Steve Lewis says it won't stop there.

He believes export figures will increase to at least 168 million tonnes by 2010 and will break through 200 million tonnes by 2017.

"When I arrived in July 2003 there wasn't a lot of activity at the Dampier Port and we had just put an ad in the paper calling for local businesses to take up land," he said.

"In just four years the situation has completely changed, land is now at a premium and we are riding one of the biggest booms Australia has seen.

"Keeping in mind the massive amount of expansion occurring in the area, in both iron ore and natural gas, there is at least another decade of growth ahead of us."

Iron ore is a major player contributing to about 81 per cent of total port throughput, while liquid gas products account for about 15 per cent and salt only three.

The authority oversees a mix of private and publicly owned loading facilities including two cargo wharfs, a bulk liquids berth and seven iron ore, salt and liquid gas berths.

The \$80-million bulk liquids berth was commissioned in 2005 and allows its inaugural customer Burrup Fertilisers to export anhydrous ammonia.

Mr Lewis said the North West Shelf Venture's Phase Five project had seen a significant tonnage increase of construction-related imports at Dampier Port.

He expected this increase would continue if Woodside gained final investment approval for its wholly-owned Pluto project later this year.

Not to mention Chevron's \$2-billion Gorgon Project and potential sixth and seventh gas processing trains at the Karratha Gas Plant.

"It was the first time the venture partners had trialled a module-build construction method, rather than the traditional stick-build process," Mr Lewis said.

"This presented some logistical challenges because single-item modules up to 1800 tonnes were being shipped from Batam in Indonesia.

"The arrival of these massive modules was quite disruptive to the rest of the port due to road closures but we have learned a lot over the past year or so.

"It has been amazing to witness the arrival of these multi-million dollar modules and how they are then slowly and carefully transported to site." If there was one thing that could bring one of Australia's fastest growing ports to a standstill it is a severe tropical cyclone.

Although Dampier Port escaped the 2006-07 cyclone season virtually unscathed, Mr Lewis said the previous year was a different story entirely.

"We copped an absolute battering with six cyclones and a couple of near-misses in a matter of months," he said.

"When you operate along the Pilbara coast cyclones are an occupation hazard and companies don't recover from export losses during cyclones.

"The iron ore industry is the hardest hit, during 2005-06 cyclonic activity prevented Pilbara Iron from shipping nearly five million tonnes of ore - they can't catch that up.

"Although the Port Authority doesn't lose too much money during cyclones, we can be closed down for days pre and post-cyclone and then spend weeks working through the shipping backlog."

Mr Lewis and former harbour master Vic Justice saw the devastating Cyclone Clare hit the coast near Dampier from front row seats at the port's control tower.

"It got quite woolly up there, with debris flying past the windows, we were actually close enough to the eye to see the wind change direction," he said.

"The ocean turns to a muddy brown with the churned up tempest and the swell was at least four metres high.

"However, we felt quite safe in the control tower. The walls are made of thick concrete it's probably one of the strongest buildings in the area."



Dampier Port Authority chief executive Steve Lewis