

Pilbara may be site of \$1b solar power station

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WA is a step closer to getting a major solar power project after Australia's biggest engineering company flagged the Pilbara as a possible location for a \$1 billion, 250 megawatt station that could produce electricity for 100,000 homes.

The plant, likely to be located inland in the Pilbara and be surrounded by iron ore mines, would take advantage of the minimal cloud cover and high levels of solar radiation that characterise Australia's deserts.

WorleyParsons' plan comes amid heightened awareness of WA's dependence on natural gas from the North-West and coal from the South-West to fuel the boom State's power needs.

The Varanus Island gas plant explosion in June triggered calls for a rethink of WA's

energy security while proposed carbon emissions trading schemes are likely to increase the attractiveness of renewable energy projects such as solar.

Indian fertiliser tycoon Pankaj Oswal has already flagged his own plans for a \$1.5 billion solar power project, also in the Pilbara, which he hopes to have up and running by 2013.

WorleyParsons' proposal is based on its Advanced Solar Thermal technology, which collects and focuses solar radiation using parabolic mirrors to heat oil to about 400C. The heat then creates steam to drive turbines and generators.

WorleyParsons director Peter Meurs said the company had been working with solar thermal plants in California for 20 years and had now decided the technology was viable for Australia.

"If we take carbon credits into account and also look at the value of this peak load power, the combination and the higher cost of energy makes thermal solar look increasingly attractive and our key customers involved in the study group recognise that," he said.

WorleyParsons has brought together nine of its customers to study the technology: Woodside, BHP Billiton, Rio Tinto, Fortescue Metals, Wesfarmers, Water Corporation, Delta Electricity, Verve and Western Power. "A couple of them are quite keen to proceed to the next phase, which will be a bankable feasibility stage," Mr Meurs said.

Mr Oswal's pre-feasibility study is scheduled for completion in September or October and has gained the support of Horizon Energy.

Mr Meurs said other areas under consideration for the plant included western Queensland, western NSW and South Australia.

He said Australia could house 34 solar thermal power stations by 2020.

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