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That's a dam fine idea



INNOVATIVE: Genex project manager John Lawlor at the site.

Picture: SCOTT RADFORD-CHISHOLM

JOHN ANDERSEN

A FORMER tailings dam is rapidly being transformed into a solar farm at the old Kidston gold mine northwest of Townsville.

The fact that a tailings dam, once the province of all sorts of dubious mine run-off, is now hosting 540,000 solar panels made robotically in Malaysia is a delicious irony.

This current phase, Stage One, is part of what will become a far grander \$1 billion solar and hydro energy project, one that has been granted Critical Infrastructure status by the Queensland Government. The only other project on the state's books that has been conferred similar status is Adani's Carmichael mine project. Simon Kidston is executive director of Genex Power, the company developing the Kidston solar and pump hydro project.

He said the project involved a \$150 million transmission line being built by the State Government from Mt Fox west of Ingham to Kidston. He said power generated at Kidston

would be sent back along this line as well as to Forsyth in the lower Gulf Country and Hughenden to the south where it would be used to facilitate the construction of wind energy precincts.

"The Queensland Government is building a green energy hub at Kidston, Forsyth and Hughenden that incorporates wind, solar and hydro. It will be the only place in the world where you will have renewable power available 24/7," he said.

Mr Kidston said the intermittent wind and solar supplies generated in the green energy hub would be backed up by the 24-hour-a-day reliability of the hydro plant at Kidston.

Electricity generated at the Kidston solar farm will also be used to run the pump hydro plant. The hydro plant will be constructed using water flow from the former gold mining pits.



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Mr Kidston said 250MW of electricity could be generated for five hours a day by pumping water through turbines from the top pit to the bottom pit.

He said during periods of peak demand the water in the top pit would be released back into the bottom pit, via the turbines. This would generate electricity that would be delivered to the national grid. In off-peak hours, electricity made in the solar farm would be used to pump the water from the bottom pit back into the top pit.

There are 110 people, mostly from Townsville, working on the project. Mr Kidston said this number would swell to more than 500 when work transitions to Stage 2 in 2018.

There are distinct advantages to building a solar farm on a disused tailings dam. There is no rock or hard ground. It is all sediment. This will be music to the ears of anyone who has ever wielded a crowbar and long-handled shovel for a living. It is on this ground that 24,640 steel posts will be driven into the earth to support the 540,000 panels.

Robin Watt from engineering and construction firm UGL, said the panels had been designed to withstand hail storms.