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Sunny outlook as new hub powers forward

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A FORMER Far North mine site, to be converted into a renewable energy hub, is expected to generate electricity by the end of the year.

The first sod was turned for the 50mW Kidston solar project near Georgetown, about 400km southwest of Cairns, yesterday.

Phase one of the project, worth \$126 million, will feature 540,000 solar panels. An initiative of ASX-listed company Genex Power, the development has been met with a 20-year revenue support agreement from the State Government.

"It's been a long hard process getting here, particularly on the funding side of it," said Genex managing director Michael Addison at the Kidston site.

"It was fairly complex. We had a lot of moving parts ... but here we are today. "We will be generating by November this year, so we're all very happy." Phase one is to be followed by a second 270mW solar operation and pumped storage hydro station, worth about \$300 million.

Mr Addison was confident financial closure would be reached for both the secondary solar project and hydro project by the end of this year.

Genex is "in discussions" with the \$5 billion Northern Australia Infrastructure Facility (NAIF) as a potential source of funding.

Set on 1237ha, the Kidston power project includes two large reservoirs. Mr Addison said

the old gold mine was a "dream" for renewable energy. "It comes with an enormous amount of infrastructure, that would otherwise have cost us hundreds of millions of dollars more," he said.

The North is poised to play a pivotal role if the State Government is to achieve its 50 per cent renewable energy target by 2030 – a benchmark that has been criticised by the LNP.

Construction also started last year on a solar and storage project near Lakeland and the \$360 million Mt Emerald Wind Farm near Mareeba is in its early stages.

Energy Minister Mark Bailey, at the site yesterday, said North Queensland was at the start of an "energy boom".

"This is one of many exciting projects starting ... it is symbolic of the transition occurring in the energy market," he said.

KIDSTON SOLAR ■ Phase one to produce 145,000mWh every year, providing more than 26,400 homes with renewable energy ■ Has a lifespan of more than 30 years ■ When completed, the 270mW phase two will integrate with the pumped storage hydro project ■ Phase one was financed through an \$8.9m ARENA grant and \$100m of debt funding, provided by the Clean Energy Finance Corporation and French investment bank Societe Generale