

Solar power offers new jobs in Pilbara projects

VICTORIA LAURIE THE AUSTRALIAN 12:00AM July 23, 2018

A Pilbara Aboriginal traditional owner group whose lands cover one-third of Western Australia's land mass hopes to develop its own solar power projects in an area designated one of the four best global spots for large-scale solar power.

The Yamatji Marlpa Aboriginal Corporation, representing 25 native title claim groups, briefed federal Indigenous Affairs Minister Nigel Scullion at a meeting this month about its decision to take equity in a solar company bidding to supply solar power in the ore-rich Pilbara.

It is the first step by Yamatji Marlpa, whose lands cover one million square kilometres, to move away from reliance on mining deals that promise jobs but often deliver only short-term menial work for Aborigines.

Yamatji Marlpa chief executive Simon Hawkins said a national report on Australia's energy future released last week failed to recognise the potential of Western Australia's solar-rich regions.

The report by the Australian Energy Market Operator, the nation's independent energy market operator, said coal-fired power plants would still deliver the cheapest electricity for the next 20 years.

Mr Hawkins said Pilbara Solar, in which Pilbara Aborigines have a 25 per cent equity stake, was exploring several commercial projects that could tap into the region's abundant hours of sun, lack of cloud cover and flat landscape suitable for solar farms.

He said indigenous groups favoured solar farm investment "because it is less invasive than a mine and its location can take into account cultural features".

He said the large iron ore agreements signed two decades ago brought benefits but companies did not permit Aboriginal equity. "This is an opportunity to turn that around," he said.

A pre-feasibility study last year, undertaken jointly with the state government, identified supply needs for regional town infrastructure, small businesses and energy-intensive mining operations. Longer term, the study said, the Pilbara could have a role in energy supply of offshore customers such as Indonesia via a proposed ASEAN grid and subsea cable.

Pilbara Solar director and renewable energy developer Richard Finlay-Jones said “with the right support from all levels of government, the Pilbara has the potential to become a 100 per cent renewable zero emissions zone within a decade”.



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