

Aborigines welcome Japanese gas deal

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ONE of the largest industrial projects in West Australian history moved a step closer yesterday with the signing of an agreement between Kimberley Aborigines and a Japanese gas exploration company.

Fifty traditional owners from the Uunguu clan and executives of explorer Inpex flew to the remote Maret Islands, where a traditional smoking ceremony preceded the signing of the heritage and environment deal.

The agreement, which allows Inpex to occupy the tiny, uninhabited islands for geotechnical research, marks significant progress by the first of several companies seeking to tap the vast Browse Basin gas fields off the Kimberley coast.

Inpex, formerly owned by the Japanese Government and still strongly linked with it, has leapfrogged other Browse Basin gas hopefuls, including Woodside, to reach an agreement with traditional owners.

Inpex Browse managing director Jiro Okada told the Aboriginal representatives goodwill had paved the way for the start of "one of the largest undertakings in Western Australia's history".

He said Inpex's proposal, which has not yet received state or federal approval, was to treat gas and condensate in a large LNG processing facility on the Maret Islands.

The company has one of the largest reservoirs yet discovered in the Browse Basin, estimated at around 10 trillion cubic feet (283 trillion litres).

"We estimate the life of the project to be 40-plus years at a capital cost in excess of \$US10 billion (\$11.66 billion)," Mr Okada said.

Relations between the Uunguu community and the company had been strained in the past, he said.

"But today we celebrate moving towards a new beginning."

No monetary sums or job commitments were contained in the agreement but Kimberley Land Council executive director Wayne Bergmann said the emotional ceremony augured well for a formal signing within 18 months.

"It was not like (signing) a normal mining agreement. This agreement was about a strategic location and the use of that land," Mr Bergmann said.

"We're calling on all players who want to bring gas ashore to come and talk to us."