

Inpex considers alternative sites

By FRIEDA Mc LOUGHLIN

JAPAN'S biggest oil producer, Inpex, has given the strongest indication yet it is considering alternative sites to its preferred Maret Islands proposal to build a gas processing plant off the Kimberley coast.

The 72-year-old chairman of the Tokyo-based company, Kunihiro Matsuo, confirmed in an interview broadcast on Bloomberg Television last week the company was considering other sites.

While he asserted the Maret Islands were still the company's favoured location, he conceded that the proposal may be rejected by the Australian Government.

He said the start date had been delayed because design work was unfinished and because concerns over activist groups needed to be

addressed. "Start-up of the project may be delayed as we have to deal with some arrangements with local citizens and authorities in Australia," Mr Matsuo said.

"At present we don't have any clear timetable because we can't determine it solely by ourselves.

"Inpex is considering alternative sites in case Australian authorities decline to approve the current location."

The recent announcement by Federal Environment Minister Peter Garrett to carry out a strategic assessment of the Kimberley and identify a big single common-user hub has cast doubt on Inpex's existing project plans.

The Maret Islands are not large enough to accommodate a hub.

Save the Kimberley spokesman Robert Vaughan said the bulletin

was positive news. "We think Inpex are feeling the pressure and shuffling their feet," Mr Vaughan said.

Inpex recently submitted a document to the Broome Shire accusing Save the Kimberley of "inaccuracies" in its opposition to the facility on the Maret Islands.

The document, titled Addressing Inaccuracies by the Save the Kimberley Group, is thought to have stemmed from a flyer produced by the environmental group in which it listed the reasons why it opposed the Maret Islands proposal.

"We were quick smart in sending the councillors a response to Inpex's swipe at us and refuted their claims," Mr Vaughan said.

"But we see current events as positive – at least Inpex are finally hearing the protests."