

Inpex eyes move to Darwin

By FRIEDA Mc LOUGHLIN

THE announcement that Japan's biggest oil exporter, Inpex, could take its multi-billion-dollar Browse Basin LNG project to Darwin rather than the Kimberley has been welcomed by environmental groups.

Last week the company signed a "project facilitation agreement" with the NT Government to investigate basing its gas project in Darwin rather than on the Kimberley coast.

Plans by Inpex to build a massive LNG plant on the Maret Islands to process gas from the Ichthys fields in the Browse Basin have faced strong opposition from conservation groups, who are concerned about the possible industrialisation of what they call one of the world's last true wilderness areas.

Taking the gas to Darwin would require an 850km pipeline rather than the 190km pipeline needed to reach the Maret Islands.

Inpex Browse managing director Jiro Okada said while the Maret Islands remained the company's preferred location, Darwin's Middle Arm was "a good alternative site

that could be developed within a reasonable time frame".

Mr Okada said environmental and engineering studies since 2004 demonstrated the "strong technical viability" of a gas plant closer to the Maret Islands, but they were exploring all realistic options.

"We continue to have a good working relationship with the Western Australian Government," Mr Okada said.

"We will continue to progress the option of developing an LNG plant in WA."

Meanwhile, Save the Kimberley, in conjunction with the Wilderness Society, the Conservation Council of WA, Environs Kimberley and the Kimberley Marine Tourism Association said they encouraged and welcomed the announcement.

A rally was due to be held yesterday outside Inpex's Perth offices to present the company with a letter, written in both English and Japanese, protesting the industrialisation of the Kimberley coast.

The groups said this would provide the company with further impe-

tus to abandon its Maret Islands plans.

Save the Kimberley spokesman Robert Vaughan said the Maret Islands proposal had enraged many in the Kimberley community.

However, Federal MHR Barry Haase slammed the WA Government, claiming a lack of action had squandered a big opportunity.

"This move by Inpex is immensely justifiable given the litany of hurdles the Government has put before them," Mr Haase said.

"They may have destroyed an opportunity that doesn't come around too often."

Broome Chamber of Commerce president Patrick Imbert said they were still confident that the correct mix of benefits and incentives would entice Inpex back.

"As any business would, Inpex has to keep their options open," Mr Imbert said.

"Now it's time for the Western Australian Government to step up to the mark."