

Coral Protected in Pluto Field

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Published: 31/10/2008

Perth company Fastwave has come up with the first ever monitoring system to be used for the protection of marine life. Woodside became the first company to use the new technology in its Pluto liquefied natural gas (LNG) project on the Burrup Peninsula in WA's north-west.



Diver checking coral near the Burrup Peninsula

Courtesy Woodside Energy

As Woodside needed to meet strict environmental guidelines when digging (or dredging) for a new 180km pipeline between the gas plant at the Burrup Peninsula and the platform in the Pluto field, protecting coral reefs was one of the conditions for getting the go-ahead from the Federal Government in October 2007.

To meet this requirement, Woodside decided to use Fastwave's underwater monitoring system. Marketing director at Fastwave Nick Daws said he believed the system was a success already and explained some of the science behind it.

"Having been in the water now for almost 12 months it has proven itself, certainly from the point of view of reducing the complexity of gathering water samples [which has been done] by using a dive-crew going out in a boat every day.

"It has had a substantial reduction in both costs and safety issues, but it also enables much more timely and frequent data readings to be made available. So from that point of view we believe there is a scope for it to be used in other future offshore projects," Mr Daws said.

"The system transmits sensor readings from the sea floor from approximately a dozen monitoring sites to a centralised environmental monitoring database. If the readings go above a certain turbidity level, there is an escalated warning process... and then they have to stop the dredging."

One of the dangers with dredging is that it stirs up sediment which can then drop onto corals and cause damage. When a lot of sediment or particles are stirred up, we get something called turbid waters. Kimberley campaigner of the Wilderness Society of WA Joshua Coates told *3rd Degree* this was a problem.

"Turbidity does impact seriously on coral reefs and sea grass systems in particular, as well as other systems like sponge gardens...it is a serious problem in terms of these kinds of developments," he said.

The Visund field is one of the most productive gas fields in Norway's North Sea. Safety and maritime manager Terje Niko at the Visund platform said companies dredging for gas pipelines in the northern hemisphere will encounter similar problems in the future.

"Corals have been found now in the Barents Sea and just outside Lofoten [a town in northern Norway]. If pipelines were to be laid on the sea floor there, then environmental organisations, StatoilHydro [the company running the platform] and the government would interfere to make sure these corals would be protected not harmed," he said.

"Alternative solutions would be provided to ensure the pipelines would avoid these natural resources. In the end, corals are valuable in an environmental sense."

"This is not a common problem for us, but we're seeing that it's becoming one. So, there's nothing else for us to do than to find other places to put the pipelines. We just can't and won't put pipelines where there are coral reefs."

Mr Coates from the Wilderness Society said he was worried about another aspect of the development on the Burrup Peninsula and that the Federal Government might have done the wrong thing in allowing it.

"One of the main issues we're concerned about in terms of the Burrup [Peninsula] is the impact this

development is having on the traditional rock art of the region. The region has been identified as one of the most significant areas in the world for indigenous rock art in terms of the quality, age and concentration of the rock art..."

"I think from the perspective of the impact on the traditional rock art, it certainly was a bad decision [to grant Woodside environmental approval]. The Premier Colin Barnett has acknowledged in Parliament ... that the process wasn't handled as well as it could be and that mistakes were made," Mr Coates said.

Woodside aims to start producing gas from the Pluto field in late 2010.