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ABC Rural

WORLD FIRST GROWING TREES WITH COAL SEAM GAS WATER

By Arlie Douglas from , QLD

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A Queensland gas company says it's set to create one of Australia's largest forestry plantations as part of its coal seam gas operation near Fairview outside Roma.

Santos Queensland says it has already planted 515,000 trees and laid 1300 kilometres of irrigation pipe.

Now the company has gained approval from the State Government to go ahead with stage one, which will see two million native Chinchilla hardwood gum trees and agricultural feed crops planted on just over two thousand hectares.

Santos says its new 2234 hectare plantation is so big, you can see it from space.

To grow trees like that on such a large scale you need water and plenty of it and there's a ready supply produced in the process of extracting coal seam gas and converting it to liquefied natural gas.

President of Santos Queensland, Rick Wilkinson, says it's the first time a project of this kind has been approved using the by-product water.

"You need a diversity of options, I don't think there's a silver bullet for the entire industry.

"This works particularly well for us because of the topography of the land in the area, the quality of the water we're dealing with and the rates with which we intend to bring it on and I'm hoping that other players in the industry take note of it and if it applies to their area it would be a great outcome.

"With coal seam gas one of the early precursors to gas is water flowing to surface and the challenge is to find a beneficial use for that water."

Green groups say they do have concerns and while they've cautiously welcomed Santos's move they want to ensure the environment is protected.

The Queensland Conservation Council's Toby Hutcheon says his group is worried about the hydrocarbons and salt content in the water.

"In terms of the hydrocarbons it essentially acts as a pollutant to the soils and in the water so all this water will inevitably end up in the water table.

"So you're essentially returning a potentially more contaminated water back into a clean

water table so that's highly questionable."

Mr Hutcheon says "you've got to understand that they're planning to use mega litres of this water putting into the environment and putting into an environment that doesn't normally have that amount of water and no one knows what that impact is going to be."

The gas company says it is taking every precaution using the country's most sophisticated water monitoring systems.

"It's very important to be responsible here and operate in a sustainable way, not only to put in place good plans but make sure the plans are being realised as you'd expect over decades."

"What we've done is chosen the Chinchilla white gums native to the area because they do have a good tolerance for a wide range of salinity and so we're able to put the water directly on the trees.

And as to whether the water could be available more widely for farmers and graziers in the region, the Santos says that could be a possibility in the future.

CRick Wilkinson, president, Santos Queensland; Toby Hutcheon, Queensland CConservation Council

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