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Mining camps powered by the sun

Thursday, 2 July 2009
Kristie Batten

REDUCING emissions is a growing concern for miners with the impending introduction of a Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme. One Perth company believes it has devised a system that will reduce pollution while cutting energy costs.

Regen Power, which designs and manufactures renewable energy systems, has set its sights on the mining industry following the success of a recent system installation.

An advanced hybrid power system has been installed at the recently reopened Eco Beach Wilderness Retreat near Broome in Western Australia's Kimberley region and Regen believes a similar system would be suitable for mining camps.

Regen chairman Professor Chem Nayer established the Centre for Renewable Energy and Sustainable Technologies Australia at Curtin University in 1988 and has 30 years experience in the field.

"Having demonstrated our company's expertise in handling a large project of this nature in a remote area of the Kimberley, we believe we have developed the credibility to build larger systems," Nayer said.

The system installed at Eco Beach comprises a 120-kilowatt grid-forming three-phase inverter, linked to 2kW peak grid-connected solar modules set onto the rooves of the resort's villas.

Excess power generated by the cells is fed back into batteries for storage, while four diesel generators are linked to the system to provide additional power if required.

"We control the diesel management, battery management and how much power is being generated by the solar panels, while minimising diesel fuel consumption," Nayer said.

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The resort first launched in 1998, but was destroyed by a cyclone in 2000.

Resort owner Karl Plunkett said power was one of the largest costs and was keen to address the issue when rebuilding the resort.

Nayer told *MiningNewsPremium.net* that cost savings would depend on how much solar power was available.

"We hope that with our system you could be saving around 30 per cent," he said.

A major advantage of the system is that it is fully automated and remotely accessible from anywhere in the world.

"It tells you what power each solar panel is producing from each villa, it tells you what the generators are producing, it tells you how much power is reserved in the batteries and it tells you if the generators are on," Plunkett said.

"You can find out instantly how much energy you are using in the bar and main areas of the resort, and how much energy you are producing for the day."

Nayer said the system was ideal for mining camps, where energy requirements varied over the day.

But at this stage, he said, Regen's systems were too small for powering actual mines.

"For powering mining operations, this may not be the right thing to do, because mining is a totally different operation and much more large scale."

He added that with the Eco Beach project only just completed, the company was yet to meet with any mining companies about the possible use of similar technologies.

In the past couple of years, as environmental sustainability has become a bigger issue, miners have been looking into ways to reduce their carbon footprint.

AngloGold Ashanti and Independence Group have investigated the possibility of using solar power at their multi-million ounce Tropicana gold project.

Last year, Newmont Mining Corporation launched a prefeasibility study into the use of solar-thermal power technology at its Tanami gold mine in the Northern Territory.

Engineering firm WorleyParsons has also been looking into solar-thermal technology, which is supported by mining heavyweights BHP Billiton and Rio Tinto.

WorleyParsons is targeting the first of a series of 250-megawatt solar-thermal power stations to be up and running by 2011.

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