

Giant water bag plan taking shape - The West Australian

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Created: 2/5/2013 10:20 AM

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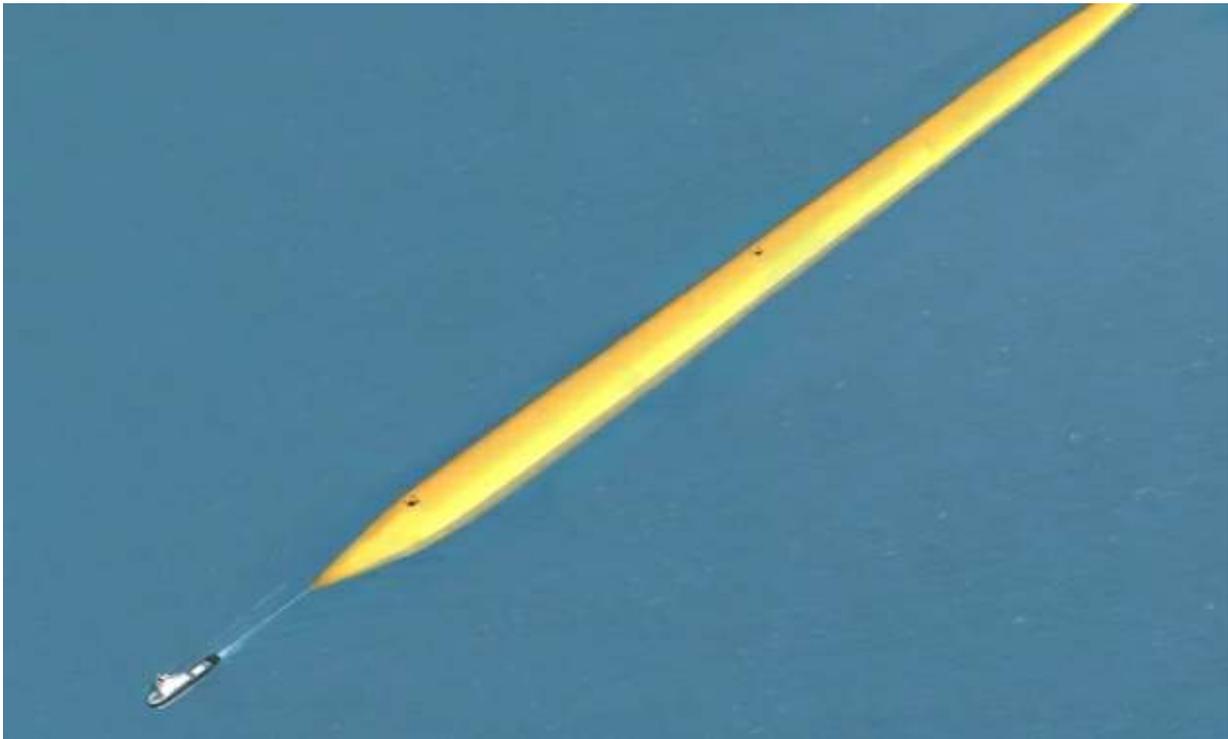
Giant water bag plan taking shape

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Updated April 14, 2011, 3:05 am



This is the new technology that is shaping as perhaps the most promising prospect to bring Kimberley water south.

Perth company Watertow, the brainchild of Dutch immigrants Jan de Geeter and John van Schagen, has spent the past four years refining plans to tow water from Wyndham's Cambridge Gulf to Nickol Bay in the Pilbara using giant, 800m-long bags made of super-strong and flexible woven polypropylene.

The pair met when they moved to Perth in 1981, Mr de Geeter as a senior pipeline engineer on Woodside Petroleum's Rankin project.

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That experience and subsequent work as an agent for a marine fabrics supplier has informed his approach to the ambitious project, which he says uses proven oilfield technologies to load and unload the bags.

The concept of towing water bags was examined by the 2004 Appleyard report into Kimberley water options

but was dismissed as being too expensive an option for Perth at \$5 a kilolitre compared to desalination at \$1.20-\$2.40 a kilolitre.

But Watertow believes its improvements, which include the new fabric and a narrower bag to reduce drag and for which it has lodged a patent application, plus its plan to transport the water only as far as the Pilbara, significantly lessens the cost to around \$2.50 a kilolitre with upfront capital costs of about \$200 million.

The State Government has committed \$370 million to a new Pilbara desalination plant that will produce water at as much as \$7 a kilolitre.

And the water bag plan has the backing of Reg Appleyard himself. Yesterday, Professor Appleyard said: "This is the one area where the technology has intervened to make it more viable than we had suggested. I think they are on the way to something quite significant."

Watertow plans to do tank testing in the Netherlands next year before building a \$2 million prototype bag to prove up the concept.

If the Pilbara pilot scheme is successful, towing water to Perth could be examined down the track.

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