



Risks in Twiggy's tryst with minister

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Body

Andrew Forrest's big plans in -Morocco could be complicated by his romantic connection with the country's Energy Minister, who also sits on the board of **Fortescue**'s joint -venture company in the North African country.

In her first comment on the matter since The Australian -revealed her identity, Moroccan Energy Minister Leila Benali -refused to shed any light on a photograph of her allegedly sharing an intimate moment with the **Fortescue** chairman in France last week.

In footage posted to a local news site, Ms Benali was asked by a Moroccan journalist whether she had a personal or business -relationship with Mr Forrest.

The minister did not confirm the authenticity of the photograph, but did not deny it. "No, no I will not speak," she said.

The romantic connection threatens to complicate matters for **Fortescue** as it draws up plans for a multi-billion-dollar renewable energy and green ammonia investment in Morocco with joint venture partners OCP Group.

In addition to being Energy Minister, Ms Benali sits on the board of state-owned OCP, along with other Moroccan government ministers.

OCP is one of the biggest phosphate miners in the world, controlling Morocco's vast deposits of the fertiliser -estimated to make up more than 70 per cent of the world's known reserves.

Together the two companies plan to build a green ammonia hub in the country, adding to OCP's fertiliser exports.

The joint venture was announced in April, and includes -renewable energy generation and "large-scale integrated green -ammonia and green fertiliser production capacity".

The two companies also plan a research, development and education facility near Marrakesh.

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OCP's plans are controversial in Morocco. It says it has already invested about $\text{€}2.5\text{bn}$ ($\text{\$}4\text{bn}$) as part of a $\text{€}12\text{bn}$ green program aimed at increasing the group's fertiliser production to 20 million tonnes a year - up from 12 million tonnes in 2022. Its initial plans for a green ammonia production centre were centred around the small fishing town of Tarfaya in southwest Morocco - once best known for the treacherous waters off its coast, a 19th-century British fortress now crumbling into the sea, and for being the closest mainland town to the surfing resorts of the Canary Islands, about 80km to the west.

OCP planned to build a -3.8 gigawatt wind and solar farm in the region, with an eventual production capacity of one million tonnes of green ammonia a year from 2027 and three million tonnes from 2032.

But, in addition to its isolation, Tarfaya is also disputed territory. It is only 35km north of the disputed regional border of the Western Sahara - a Spanish colony until 1975, but since occupied by Morocco.

Moroccan control of the -region is disputed by the traditional Sahrawi people. Their separatist movement has this year launched attacks on Moroccan troops in the region - which already hosts large wind farms built by companies owned by the country's royal family.

It is unclear whether **Fortescue**'s joint venture with OCP will focus on the Moroccan company's original plans, and the Australian mining and energy giant has not elaborated further on their work in the region.

"The **Fortescue** team is working with key stakeholders as we continue to develop our ambitious strategy with OCP, developed over more than two years, to develop green energy, hydrogen and ammonia in Morocco," a spokesman said on Tuesday.

Fortescue's African plans have already suffered one major setback this month, after it was - replaced as the preferred developer of the giant Grand Inga hydro-electric project in the Democratic Republic of Congo by Nigerian oil company Natural Oilfield Services.

The Grand Inga, estimated to come with a total cost of more than $\text{\$US}80\text{bn}$ ($\text{\$}120\text{bn}$), was a favoured project of Dr Forrest, and **Fortescue**'s involvement was announced with fanfare in mid-2021, during the first flush of announcements around the company's plans to become a green energy giant by the end of the decade.

MARGIN CALL P13

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