

# AUSTRALIAN FINANCIAL REVIEW

## Old Holden car plant to drive hydrogen fuel cells business



**Simon Evans** Senior reporter Aug 23, 2023 – 5.00am

### KEY POINTS

- **Why it matters:** HDF Energy is listed on the stock exchange in Paris and has a growing business making hydrogen fuel cells in shipping container-sized metal boxes.
- It wants to become a sizeable player in the hydrogen industry in Australia, and the Asia-Pacific where it is agreements in Vietnam, the Philippines and Indonesia.
- It is spending \$34m on a manufacturing hub in France which was once a Ford transmission factory, and is eyeing a similar conversion at the Holden site in Adelaide.

Hydrogen fuel cell company HDF Energy aims to become a bigger player in the Southern Hemisphere by using part of an old Holden car factory to manufacture 12-metre metal “boxes” containing fuel cells providing electricity.

Deputy chief executive of the French group, Jean-Noel de Charentenay, said the company is examining whether to set up its Australasian base on the former Holden site at Elizabeth in Adelaide’s north to be the manufacturing hub for the Asia-Pacific region.



Jean-Noel de Charentenay, the deputy CEO of French group HDF Energy, in Adelaide for talks to advance his group's hydrogen fuel cell plans. **Roy VanDerVegt**

“Australia is a good spot,” he told *The Australian Financial Review*.

HDF Energy, which is listed on the Paris stock exchange, is part-way through a €20 million (\$34 million) investment on converting an abandoned Ford transmission manufacturing factory near Bordeaux in France into its first dedicated hydrogen fuel cell production plant.

The French factory will be up and running by March 2024, in readiness for manufacturing of the modular fuel cells.

HDF Energy, which is listed on the Euronext exchange after an initial public offering in 2021, is in talks with the owner of the Holden site, Melbourne property developer and entrepreneur Ross Pelligra.

It is also vying to be part of a \$593 million hydrogen project near Whyalla which is being funded by the South Australian government and championed by Premier Peter Malinauskas as a core economic driver.

The government aims to have a taxpayer-funded 250-megawatt hydrogen production facility, 200-megawatt hydrogen power plant and a hydrogen storage facility up and running in early 2026 at Whyalla, in the state's north. More than 60 companies put in an expression of interest and the government is aiming to announce the successful bidder by October.

Mr de Charentenay said he couldn't comment any further on that process. “We have submitted our interest,” he said.

**It's a pure coincidence. A new industry is taking place on an old industry.**

— Jean-Noel de Charentenay, HDF Energy deputy CEO

The company has struck agreements with governments in Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam and Namibia to advance hydrogen plans in those countries, providing turnkey solutions where multiple numbers of the 12-metre boxes containing hydrogen fuel cells can be connected to provide electricity.

Mr de Charentenay said the group was also in talks with large mining companies to supply the units at mining sites.

He said it was an ironic twist that the former Ford factory site at Blanquefort in France had been dismantled and HDF Energy had taken over there, and a similar prospect loomed at the Holden site.

“It’s a pure coincidence. A new industry is taking place on an old industry,” he said.

Should the Holden site plans proceed, the cost would be less than the \$34 million investment in France, he said. “We took the decision in Europe to build from scratch,” he said.

Mr de Charentenay said existing buildings at Holden could be utilised, and production lines installed for the hydrogen fuel cells, adding: “It’s more off the shelf.”

Holden stopped manufacturing cars at the Elizabeth plant in late 2017, and in 2020 US parent General Motors announced it would ditch the Holden brand, with 185 Holden dealerships scrapped around Australia.

Mr de Charentenay said being publicly listed had enabled HDF Energy to access capital to fund its plans, and he acknowledged there had been an enormous amount of funds invested around the world in a sector which still needed to prove itself capable of delivering solid investment returns.

“The whole industry has to demonstrate that hydrogen will be a real industry in the future,” he said.

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