

Rock art no bar to Fortescue line

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The West Australian government yesterday gave Fortescue Metals Group the green light to build a rail line through an area of delicate Aboriginal rock art in the Pilbara in the face of strenuous opposition from some Aboriginal people.

The area of 150,000 hectares known as Woodstock Abydos, 150 kilometres south of Port Headland, is a protected area under the state Aboriginal Heritage Act. But Fortescue says it needs to build the rail line because it has been denied access by BHP Billiton to its line, which runs through the same area.

"This is a win-win outcome which protects valuable rock art and delivers jobs and economic benefits for indigenous and non-indigenous Western Australians," Indigenous Affairs Minister Sheila McHale said.

The construction of the 56 kilometre rail line was not opposed by the local Palyku and Kariyarra Aboriginal groups, who signed a land-use agreement with Fortescue last year.

But some members of those groups now say they were not aware

of the details of the proposed rail line and the protected status of the area before signing that deal.

Ms McHale said yesterday that the strip of land excised from the protected area did not include any rock art.

The issue of mining development and Aboriginal cultural heritage is becoming increasingly fraught in the Pilbara, with a coalition of environmental and Aboriginal groups opposing the Fortescue rail line and separate plans by Woodside to build a liquefied

natural gas onshore processing plant on the Burrup Peninsula.

Yesterday, Greens senator Bob Brown said Aboriginal art of international significance was being destroyed because of a dispute between BHP Billiton and Fortescue.

"A corporate dispute means a significant part of Australia's heritage becomes expendable," Mr Brown said.

"There is an alternative — share the [BHP] rail line. Surely companies can understand that this heritage is not theirs to expend; would they run

a rail line through the MCG if that

was the cheapest alternative? Of course not."

But Ms McHale said there would be minimal disturbance of the rock art.

"Where excavation will need to take place, special non-explosive techniques, similar to those used in the Beaconsfield mine rescue, will be used to guarantee there is no impact," she said.

Aboriginal author Sally Morgan, whose family is from the Woodstock-Abydos area and who

has been leading opposition to the Fortescue proposal, said yesterday Ms McHale's decision set a damaging precedent. Other companies — including BHP and Rio Tinto — would now seek access to the area.

"Fortescue is only one of a number of mining companies that wants to get into this area," Ms Morgan said. "The government is not looking at the bigger picture of what is happening to areas like this in the Pilbara and allowing the piecemeal destruction through industrial development."



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