

Greens slam environmental law overhaul

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Parliament has approved a major overhaul of Australia's environmental laws which green groups have lamented as a backward step for the country's natural habitat.

In a late-night sitting, the Senate passed changes to the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act which the government says will streamline environmental regulations and cut red tape.

The Environment and Heritage Legislation Amendment Bill (No.1) 2006 reduces processing time and costs for developers, relaxes environmental assessments and simplifies development approvals for large projects like the controversial liquefied natural gas scheme on Western Australia's Burrup Peninsula.

The bill also allows the government to make decisions on different development approval stages simultaneously.

A furious Greens leader Bob Brown condemned the legislation as a regressive step for the environment that was designed to curry favour with big businesses wanting to profit from developments.

"This is a disgraceful piece of legislation ... that will debase the Australian environment for a long, long time to come," he told parliament.

"What a lot of sellouts you people are. How could you do this to the coming generations of this country?."

The legislation contained an amendment designed to allow the controversial Gunns pulp mill in Tasmania to proceed, Senator Brown said.

In his second reading speech, Environment Minister Ian Campbell said the bill would streamline development processes while protecting the natural environment.

"This legislation gives our money, our effort and our partnership a renewed focus," he said.

"It gets away from saying, 'Let's have legislation, let's have bureaucracy and let's have more paperwork'.

"Let us, in fact, have more action to protect Australian wildlife, protect habitat and actually protect our environment."