

Govt refuses listing for Burrup art site

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Rock art that has stood for thousands of years will give way to bulldozers within weeks after the federal government on Friday gave the go-ahead to clear a section of the Burrup Peninsula site in north-west Australia.

The government's decision to reject an emergency heritage application means an area of about 0.2 of a square kilometre, said to contain about 165 ancient petroglyphs, can be cleared if needed.

However, the government believes only about 50 petroglyphs threatened by a new liquefied natural gas (LNG) project will need to be moved, to a site yet to be determined.

A single standing stone that might have national heritage value could also be removed after agreement between Aboriginal groups and the WA government, Environment Minister Ian Campbell said.

The government's decision was slammed by Greens WA senator Rachel Siewert who, along with Labor MP Carmen Lawrence and Independent MP Peter Andren, had sought the emergency listing.

Woodside Energy said site preparation work, including construction of a new track into the area, would start within weeks.

The National Trust of Australia says the Burrup site, in remote north-west Australia, contains one of the world's largest and most important collections of petroglyphs - ancient rock carvings dating back as far as the last ice age.

It says the collection of standing stones may be the largest in the world.

Senator Campbell said the small site where Woodside hopes to build LNG storage tanks for its Pluto gas project did not qualify for emergency heritage listing.

"On the basis of evidence presented to me, which includes advice from the Australian Heritage Council, I do not consider that the perceived threat to national heritage values of the area warrants an emergency heritage listing," he said.

"According to the council, while the overall region has national heritage values, not all sites in the Dampier Archipelago and the Burrup Peninsula have the required values."

Senator Campbell said the area nominated in the emergency listing totalled 874 square kilometres, comprising islands in the Dampier Archipelago and the Burrup Peninsula itself.

"But the only specific location which I am advised has an immediate threat to national heritage values is part of the area known as Site A where the disturbance footprint is less than 0.2 square kilometres," he said.

A decision on the much larger area, known as Part B, remains to be made.

Woodside spokesman Rob Milhouse said the company welcomed Senator Campbell's decision.

He said work on a jetty, the LNG tanks and an access road to Site A would begin within the next few weeks, although the company had not yet made a final decision to proceed with the project.

"We've still got a fair way to go before the whole thing starts, per se," Mr Milhouse told AAP.

He said any moving of heritage material would be done in accordance with the instructions of four Aboriginal tribes with whom the company had been talking.

"We have been working with them for a couple of years. We've got a relationship that goes back 30 years in that area," Mr Milhouse said.

"Everything we've done to this point has involved them. They've concurred with it all.

"We're now at the place where we know where the sites are, we know their significance, we've avoided most of them - 150 or so that are still left.

"If we can't continue to avoid them, we'll move them, after discussions with the Aborigines."

Senator Siewert described the decision as a tragedy.

"Instead of protecting the site, the minister is effectively letting the bulldozers in. It is a tragedy and a farce that the government still can't get this right," she said.

"This is disgraceful from a minister whose duty is to protect all of this precious and unique rock art."