Burrup gas project is approved despite rock art worries

BEN SPENCER

Indigenous Affairs Minister Michelle Roberts gave Woodside the green light yesterday to develop a second parcel of land on its \$10 billion Pluto gas project on the Burrup Peninsula, arguing the dollar value of the controversial development was too great to ignore.

Mrs Roberts' approval came despite calls for the project to be moved to protect its ancient rock art, with Federal Environment Minister Malcolm Turnbull being urged to safeguard the site by giving it a national heritage listing.

Work on the project began among much furore early last month after Woodside had committed \$1.4 billion to preliminary work on the Burrup industrial estate's Site A, which is the location for Pluto's LNG storage tanks.

Mrs Roberts said she had weighed up the evidence into Woodside's use of Burrup industrial estate's Site B for the Pluto project and had decided to grant consent "in the interests of State and the nation".

She said the approval would be subject to stringent conditions to protect Aboriginal sites of high significance and the relocation of any material, including rock art, would be done in consultation with the land's traditional owners.

"The importance of the Woodside project goes beyond its impact on the State of WA, it extends to the national economy," Mrs Roberts told Parliament.

"This decision is of great importance to Australia and in today's dollar terms will generate \$17.5 billion to the national economy.

"In terms of WA's benefit, the project will generate \$28 billion in wealth to the State economy."

Mrs Roberts said there were no economically viable alternative sites to Pluto site B.

The project is still awaiting further environmental approvals and a final investment decision by Woodside is not expected until the middle of the year, but its LNG exports are set to start in 2010.

A spokeswoman for Woodside said the company welcomed Mrs Roberts' decision but said it was one of several approvals it required for the project to proceed.

Liberal MP and former opposition leader Colin Barnett — who has been campaigning to move the project to a cleared, adjacent site leased by the North-West Shelf Venture Partners — said he was disappointed with the decision.

While not critical of Woodside, Mr Barnett said it could find itself in a vulnerable legal position because Pluto had not been subject to a State agreement.

"I think they could be somewhat exposed," Mr Barnett said.

Woodside has promised that its plans will not disturb 95 per cent of the area's rock art — close to 3000 pieces. It plans to move about 150 pieces of rock art in consultation with Aboriginal custodians.