

Aboriginal land groups in heritage extortion: WA miners

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WA mining companies have accused Aboriginal groups of extorting money through spurious heritage claims, which they say is partly to blame for a big fall in exploratory drilling.

The Association of Mining and Exploration Companies claims Aboriginal land councils have been misusing laws requiring indigenous involvement in heritage surveys by withholding their services unless paid big money sums.

Exploration usually cannot begin if culturally significant areas have not been identified in heritage surveys.

AMEC chief executive Justin Walawski said the hold-up was partly behind a 60 per cent drop in metres drilled in greenfield sites in the past decade, despite the mining boom.

He claimed one mining company had refused demands from an Aboriginal land council which would have cost it \$500,000 upfront and in bills for the council's ongoing legal fees.

"We have been treating them with the presumption they are trying to protect Aboriginal heritage, but that doesn't seem to be the case any longer. It seems to be nothing but a basis for

charging upfront payments," Mr Walawski said. "They are not using it to protect heritage. They are using it simply to extort funds."

The Kimberley Land Council, one of five indigenous groups which conduct heritage surveys, claims that AMEC made up the allegation in a bid to excuse member companies from making community donations.

KLC executive director Wayne Bergman said most heritage surveys cost between \$2000 and \$30,000 and he was unaware of any at \$500,000.

The land councils charged a small daily rate of less than \$500 for individual traditional owners to help with surveys. The rest was mostly reimbursement for on-ground costs, such as helicopter use, and a small administration fee for the land council.

Mr Bergman said some mining companies spent thousands on lawyers to escape a clause requesting a community donation worth 4 per cent of on-ground costs. "We are representing some of the poorest people on the planet living in Third World conditions. The companies want to talk to them directly. None of us get access to their members or shareholders."