

Turnbull clears Woodside plant

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Federal Environment Minister Malcolm Turnbull has for the third time in two weeks stared down conservationists to give the green light to a multibillion-dollar industrial project.

In a sign the government is wrapping up all unfinished business before the election, Mr Turnbull announced late on Friday that he had approved Woodside Petroleum's \$12 billion liquefied natural gas plant on Western Australia's Burrup Peninsula.

The announcement came two days after Mr Turnbull approved WA's \$20 billion Gorgon gas plant and a week after he gave the go-ahead to timber company Gunns's contentious proposal to build a \$1.7 billion pulp mill in the picturesque Tamar Valley in northern Tasmania.

Like the pulp mill issue, Woodside's Pluto development has caused problems for Mr Turnbull in his own electorate of Wentworth, in Sydney's Eastern Suburbs.

The group Friends of Australian Rock Art last month took an

advertisement in the local newspaper, the *Wentworth Courier*, to protest against Mr Turnbull's stance.

While most concern about Pluto has centred on rock art, Mr Turnbull's announcement on Friday was concerned only with environmental matters, including the impact on sea turtles and the olive python.

He said his approval was conditional on Woodside preparing management plans to reduce the impact on threatened species and the marine environment.

Concerns about rock art were thought to be resolved in July, when the government specifically excluded the area needed for the Pluto gas plant from a heritage listing that applied to much of the Burrup Peninsula.

But another hurdle was created when an Aboriginal elder from the area, Wilfred Hicks, last month filed an emergency application to prevent work going ahead.

A Woodside spokesman told the *Weekend AFR* on Friday the

company was still waiting to be told the outcome of Mr Hicks's application and that it could not proceed with the Pluto project, even though it was ready to, until the matter had been resolved.

But in a sign of the haste with which the government was clearing the decks on Friday, a spokesman for Mr Turnbull's office said Assistant Environment Minister John Cobb had already dismissed Mr Hicks's application.

A spokesman for Mr Cobb, however, said no announcement had been made.

Robin Chapple, co-convenor of the Friends of Australian Rock Art, said if the Howard government allowed the project to go ahead it would make a mockery of Prime Minister John Howard's pledge during the week to work for reconciliation.

"We have here the pre-eminent site in Australia, if not the world, of humankind's pre-history, developed by the indigenous people . . . being shown no respect whatsoever," Mr Chapple said.

KEY POINTS

- ▶ Woodside has gained approval for a \$12 billion liquefied natural gas project in Western Australia.
- ▶ The company has to be careful of sea turtles and the olive python.
- ▶ The government is clearing the decks for an election.



Malcolm Turnbull: three in a row