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AM - Concerns over gas processing plant in WA

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Reporter: David Weber

ELIZABETH JACKSON: The National Trust of Western Australia is considering appealing against the latest approval for a gas processing plant which critics say will threaten ancient Aboriginal rock art.

The West Australian Government is allowing the development on the Burrup Peninsula to go ahead, but has asked that a road and pipeline be re-routed to protect the rock carvings, which are estimated to be tens of thousands of years old.

The National Trust of Western Australia says it has some major concerns, as David Weber reports.

DAVID WEBER: Woodside will need to find a new route for a transportation pipe and access road away from significant sites.

The Indigenous Affairs Minister, Sheila McHale.

SHEILA MCHALE: The decision I've made allows the Pluto project to proceed, whilst ensuring the protection of some of the area's most significant Indigenous heritage sites.

DAVID WEBER: Will any rock art be lost as a result of this decision?

SHEILA MCHALE: Look, it's impossible to have development without impacting to some extent on Aboriginal sites.

And therefore there are a number of sites, which will certainly be within the development area.

DAVID WEBER: Sheila McHale says Aboriginal groups will undertake close monitoring of those sites.

Woodside is striving for a no-destruction policy. The company says it can find an acceptable route for the pipe and access road.

The company has an estimated 1,240 panels within its lease, a very small fraction of all the rock art on the Burrup.

But the National Trust of Western Australia says the rerouting cannot take place without more destruction.

Chief Executive Tom Perrigo says the scientific value of the rock art cannot be underestimated.

TOM PERRIGO: The Minister refers to it in her press release as Indigenous heritage. It's not Indigenous heritage. It's Australia's heritage.

DAVID WEBER: The Minister has said there needs to be a careful balance between the heritage values and Woodside's ambitions in that part of Australia.

TOM PERRIGO: There's no problem with that. But a careful balance does not mean destroying an international significant, potentially, World Heritage site.

But when the Minister announces in her press release that it's saving a part of the site, what it doesn't say it's destroying the other part.

And that's really unacceptable.

DAVID WEBER: The Greens Senator, Rachel Siewert has been highly critical of the process.

She says Woodside should just relocate.

RACHEL SIEWERT: That development should not come at the cost of cultural heritage that is unique in the world, that is one of, if not the most important rock art sites in the world.

There are other sites for this development. Other companies have chosen not to build on this site because of its cultural significance.

You could go further up the coast, inland, there's in fact another site on the current north-west shelf site that many people feel that this development could go in.

DAVID WEBER: Woodside says it hopes to have received all the government approvals by the end of this year. The company is yet to make final investment decisions for Pluto. They aren't likely before next year.

ELIZABETH JACKSON: David Weber with that report.