

Inpex nervous about native title claim

May 28, 2008

JAPANESE oil and gas giant Inpex is "nervous" about a native title claim affecting the planned site of a \$12 billion gas plant on Darwin Harbour, the Federal Court has been told.

Northern Territory government lawyer Sonia Brownhill made the remark at today's resumed hearing of the decade-old native title claim over the site by traditional owner Tibby Quall.

Ms Brownhill said the uncertainty over the site's status needed to be resolved without delay.

Today's hearing coincided with news that Chief Minister Paul Henderson would fly to Paris in a bid to secure the lucrative gas plant project for Darwin.

"I have personally taken Darwin's case to the highest levels of Inpex. Now I am taking our case to key decision makers at Total's headquarters," he said.

"It's important I personally tell Total the territory is open for business and we want this project."

Japanese company Inpex controls the Browse Basin gas field off the Kimberley coast of Western Australia, which it operates on behalf of joint venture partner Total.

Inpex had planned to pipe the gas 200km to a proposed liquefied natural gas plant on the Maret Islands, but opposition from WA environmental groups has hindered the scheme.

A project facilitation agreement was signed between Inpex and the NT government earlier this year.

If it proceeds, the gas will be piped 900km to a new LNG plant at Middle Arm on Darwin Harbour.

Mr Henderson, who leaves for Paris on Sunday, said Total management was expected to play an important role in deciding where the gas plant would be located.

He said Darwin offered the project a "high a degree of certainty and security".

Mr Henderson has previously argued that the territory was not affected by the same sort of native title claims that arise in WA.

The Federal Court was told today that land earmarked for the plant was subject to a native title claim lodged by Mr Quall a decade ago.

Ms Brownhill told the court that Inpex was "nervous" about the claim, which if upheld could result in a hefty compensation payout.

She said the matter was urgent and needed to be resolved in days and not months.

But Justice Edward Reeves said it was a statement of opinion and not fact that Inpex was nervous, and he allowed Mr Quall a month to prepare his case.

Charles Roche from the Environment Centre of the Northern Territory said Mr Henderson's trip to Paris was "an act of desperation".

"The government's obsession with Inpex is nothing more than economic scaremongering," he said.

"The territory's focus should be on sustainable development in keeping with our famous territory lifestyle, not sacrificing our harbour to industrial development."

Mr Henderson said the NT government was not nervous about the native title claim, adding that in the unlikely event it was upheld the government would happily pay compensation.

"We're very confident the claim won't succeed," he said, adding that even if it did it would not deter any development at Middle Arm.

"We'd pay compensation."

AAP