

Bergmann speaks out about gas development

CONFUSION over who stands where on gas development has led Kimberley Land Council (KLC) executive director Wayne Bergmann to speak out at length.

He said the prospect of gas development along the Kimberley coastline was a huge issue for everyone in the region.

"The KLC has received instructions from Kimberley traditional owners, through their native title claim group meetings, to represent them in their efforts to take care of their country and their communities," Mr Bergmann said.

"We understand that a lot of other Kimberley residents are concerned about the impacts gas development may bring, both positive and negative.

"Kimberley traditional owners also have many concerns about potential gas development and more generally about the development of our region.

"The whole Kimberley is coming under increased pressure and traditional owners will not be left out of discussions about the future of our region."

Mr Bergmann said his people knew very well the beauty and value of the Kimberley region and understood that other people shared these environmental values.

"As traditional owners, we have our own responsibilities to protect the environment, together with our culture and heritage.

"At the same time, our responsibilities must also include bringing our people out of poverty.

"We are all aware of the appalling state of disadvantage under which most of our people live.

"Our health and life expectancy are below acceptable standards.

"Our children struggle to attain even the most basic education.

"Our housing is poor and overcrowded and even during a resource boom and skills shortage, only 16 per cent of Aboriginal people in the Kimberley participate in the mainstream labour market.

"We are taking responsibility for lifting ourselves out of these third world conditions.

"We would like the wider community, industry, and governments to support us in these efforts.

"That is why, represented by the KLC, traditional owners have negotiated an active role in discussions relating to gas development.

"We are undertaking a thorough process to ensure our people become well informed about these matters.

"This will assist them in making

wise decisions for our people, our environment, and our region."

Mr Bergmann said these decisions would be made by Aboriginal people, not the KLC.

As part of this process, the KLC has already facilitated nearly 20 meetings, held in eight major coastal communities.

From these meetings, a 'Traditional Owner Taskforce' has been established.

The elected members of the taskforce are drawn from every native title claim group along the Kimberley coast.

Taskforce members will represent local views and concerns and take back information on potential gas development to their groups.

Mr Bergmann said they would assist in ensuring their people had all the information they needed to make decisions on gas development.

"This week we are holding the first meeting of the Traditional Owner Taskforce in Broome.

"The State Government has said that development can only go ahead with the informed consent and economic participation of Kimberley traditional owners.

"We are not just focused on achieving economic benefits; we are not interested in 'development at any cost'.

"Traditional owners insist that if development goes ahead, it must occur in ways that protect environmental and cultural values, because for us land is an integral part of who we are, and is central to our culture and our well being.

"If development is to go ahead, it must be on the basis of an economic partnership with Traditional Owners to ensure the development brings long-term benefits," Mr Bergmann said.

"Traditional owners are considering all the matters surrounding gas development, in the context of balancing cultural and environmental values, whilst creating a long term future for our people, independent of government welfare.

"Unless we have the right to make decisions about development on our own land, Aboriginal people will continue to be shut out of the resource boom that has brought so many benefits to the rest of the community.

"We will be forced into continued dependence on government welfare, low education standards, sub-standard housing, and negligible employment levels and no one wants that to continue."



Kimberley Land Council (KLC) executive director Wayne Bergmann.