

Gas group leaves Ripper in cold

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The proponent of Australia's biggest resource project has refused to back Treasurer Eric Ripper's claim that it has told the State Government it has not made a decision on the location of a \$25 billion liquefied natural gas refinery.

Speculation is rife that Inpex, a Japanese-backed company, and its French partners Total will build the processing plant in the Northern Territory near Darwin despite the joint venture's gas field being off the Kimberley coast near Broome.

The company has been wooed by the Northern Territory while the State Government negotiates over an LNG hub in the north rather than allow gas companies to develop different sites for their processing plants.

Attempts to find a suitable location in the Kimberley for the hub have people and provide a \$50 billion income stream over several decades

Mr Ripper claims the company told him on Thursday night that no decision had been made on the location of the project. But Mr Ripper conceded yesterday he was aware Inpex had signed an "undertaking" with the NT Government.

"However, the economic case for a West Kimberley site is strong. The Commonwealth approvals process that applies to the West Kimberley will also apply in Darwin. A West Kimberley site with all approvals cleared will be delivered more quickly than any other site with all approvals cleared," Mr Ripper said.

It's also believed that Total will open an office in Perth next week with Mr Ripper in attendance, further boosting the Government's belief that WA was still in line to win the project.

Mr Ripper insisted yesterday that "Inpex informed my office yesterday been hindered by environmental, Aboriginal and heritage issues, although the State Government expects to release a short list of sites in October.

The Inpex onshore facilities will account for a major part of the \$25 billion project that will employ 4000 (Thursday) that they were still determining their position".

But asked to confirm Mr Ripper's claims yesterday, Inpex spokesman Sean Kildare would only say the company was not ready to make an announcement. "I'm sorry, I understand how this is a difficult response from me and it isn't directly answering the question, but at this stage given the sensitivity of all these matters and the sensitive time we're in, we're not in a position to talk about announcements or decisions," Mr Kildare said.

Liberal leader Colin Barnett, who met company representatives this week, said the State's trading reputation with Japan was being damaged by the State

Government's refusal to nominate an area for the plant.

"It will damage the reputation of this State in Japan at the highest levels of business and government, there's no doubt about that," Mr Barnett said. "They are offended by the way they have been treated. I think they feel slighted by the West Australian Government."

Alan Carpenter yesterday stood by Labor's decision to establish a single hub facility for LNG processing on the Kimberley coast.

"I don't believe that it would be in the best interests of the State to have a proliferation of LNG facilities all along the Kimberley coast, in fact I think it would be nightmarish," the Premier said.

Inpex was likely to face longer delays in securing approvals if it moved to Darwin, he said.

Greens leader Bob Brown, in Perth yesterday to help launch the State party's campaign, said the Greens had concerns about the LNG plant being in either WA or the NT and called for wide-ranging environmental and social assessment, but doubted that proper scrutiny would be given.

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