

Showdown looms over Kimberley gas hub decision

26th October 2008, 11:00 WST

It is the question without an answer: How to balance necessary industrial development with the wishes of the people most likely to be affected by it.

It is a battle which has been fought — sometimes won, sometimes lost — all over the country, from the jarrah forests of the South-West of WA to the Franklin Dam in Tasmania.

Now a new battle looms, in the peaceful waters of the Kimberley coast.

Colin Barnett has named North Head, 26km north of Beagle Bay community, as his preferred site for the State's gas hub.

But if you live next door to the site and your family has done for several generations, and if the unspoilt beauty and natural wonder of the area is close to your heart, do your wishes count?

No one doubts that the hub is necessary. It has the capacity to help pour money into the State's coffers. It is possible, too, that it could provide valuable jobs for the very people most concerned about it. The trouble is, no one wants 1000ha of industrial development in their backyard.

At first glance, North Head is a pretty remote place. Its shoreline is rocky and fringed by reefs. But its real beauty is that what's there is untouched.

Tristan Sarah is one of five generations of the Cox family who have lived at Beagle Bay. Standing on the headland he points out to sea where you can sometimes see whales go by.

Will they still want to come if there is a pipeline or a port? he wonders. Unseen, but in the area, are half a dozen family outstations which for generations have been used for hunting and fishing. They will, he presumes, be doomed.

The failure of the former Carpenter government to complete a deal on where the hub should go has been blamed, particularly by the Premier, for Japanese company Inpex deciding to locate its multi-billion-dollar LNG plant in Darwin. He is eager that the hub be built without further delay.

But in naming North Head as his preferred site, he has sparked fierce protest among Aboriginal groups and environmentalists.

Kimberley Land Council chief executive Wayne Bergmann agrees that the North Head site was one of four which an exhaustive process of consultation among traditional owners came up with.

But in no way, he says, did the KLC sign off on it.

"It was one of four sites which we believed to be worthy of more investigation," he said.

He fears now that the decision will be forced on the council and that questions which the traditional owners still want answered — how many people will be working on the hub, where will they live, where will their fresh water come from, what regulations will be enforced to ensure that any environmental damage is repaired, just for a start — may not be examined.

"We were genuinely shocked by Mr Barnett's announcement," he said. "He's pulled the rug from under us.

"He must take personal control of it now and talk to Aboriginal people."

Neither does he have any faith in the argument that the hub will bring much-needed jobs for his people.

"Mr Barnett says he wants construction to start in June next year and it is in the construction phase that there will be the most jobs. But there have been no training programs running in the Kimberley and so we don't have job-ready workers," he said. Once finished, he understands the hub will employ about 500 people, mostly in the more highly skilled jobs which Aboriginals would find hard to fill.

A fierce critic of the North Head site is Albert Wiggan, a young Aboriginal man from Beagle Bay with an infectious determination and a fierce belief that the people of the community have not been consulted adequately. "We're not anti-development," he said. "But we are afraid of having this industrial hub for the next 100 years." He says the hub should go to Burrup where there is already development. "If Inpex is prepared to build a pipeline to take the gas to Darwin, then it can be done," he said.

Like Mr Bergmann, he doubts the reality of the jobs carrot. "Most of the people in Beagle Bay are employed anyway," he says. "Of course we should contribute to the economy, but we should be able to do that ourselves, by tourism, by taking control of our own future."

He plans a public meeting in Beagle Bay for November 6.

If Aboriginal people are furious at the collapse of the negotiation process so, too, are conservationists.

Environs Kimberley director Maria Mann said: "We think the Premier is out of order. Before the election we were locked in a process which still had a way to run. For him to pre-empt the outcome is just wrong. It's not the action one would expect from a leader."

She said researchers had concerns about all the shortlisted sites, including North Head, because of possible impact on marine wildlife, including turtles and whales.

PAM CASELLAS