

Whale area put Japanese firm off Barnett gas hub

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The Japanese company Colin Barnett wants to lure back to WA to build a \$25 billion gas plant in the Kimberley does not like his preferred site for the State's first LNG precinct because it is a whale resting area.

Documents obtained by The West Australian under Freedom of Information laws reveal that in July Inpex wrote to Duncan Ord, chairman of the State Government's northern development task force, warning that a number of the shortlisted sites, including North Head, were not suitable for several reasons including the threat they posed to whales.

In October when the Premier released the task force's report, which shortlisted four possible sites for the project, he controversially named North Head, 26km north of Beagle Bay, as his preferred site.

After Inpex announced it would build its gas plant in Darwin rather than the Kimberley, Mr Barnett admitted that his desire to lure the company's gas development back to WA had helped form his decision to nominate North Head as his preferred site.

Inpex has repeatedly stated its favoured Kimberley site is Maret Islands, located off the coast and not a shortlisted site, while documents reveal it would also consider the Anjo Peninsula.

In an email attached to the letter to Mr Ord, Inpex said its research suggested the whale issue was a potential gas development "showstopper".

"Inpex . . . would certainly struggle to endorse any location that interferes directly with whale calving/resting/migration," the email said.

On Thursday, about 500 locals attended a Save the Kimberley rally in Broome to protest against Mr Barnett's push to industrialise the region.

North Head has been identified as a nursery for humpback whales and a feeding ground for flatback turtles, both of which are vulnerable species.

The FOI documents also reveal that Inpex gave the Kimberley Land Council more than \$4 million during negotiations for a possible site for a gas processing hub and repeatedly warned the previous Labor government it was considering building its gas plant in Darwin rather than off the WA coast.

Inpex wrote to Mr Ord in February detailing the funding it had paid to the KLC between 2006 and January this year.

This funding was on top of the almost \$7 million paid to the KLC under a financial agreement with the previous government to consult traditional landowners over gas development in the region.

Mr Barnett said on Thursday the KLC, which had asked the State Government for another \$2 million to consult traditional owners, would not get any more large payments.

PERTH
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