

# Watchdog rejects Barnett's gas hub

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Colin Barnett's favoured location for a controversial gas processing hub has been rejected by the State's environmental watchdog because it is likely to force the closure of nearby Aboriginal communities and interfere with a humpback whale breeding ground.

The Environmental Protection Authority's advice has delivered a major blow to Mr Barnett's preference for building the hub at North Head.

It warned the location was unsuitable because it would pose unmanageable environmental risks.

The watchdog said the least "environmentally constrained" site on a short-list of four on the Kimberley coastline was Gourdon Bay, 70km south-west of Broome. But it said environmental risks were also likely to be manageable at James Price Point, 60km north of Broome on the Dampier Peninsula, which is Mr Barnett's second preference for the hub.

The EPA said it would not be possible to keep gas, noise and other emissions from a hub at North Head, 125km north of Broome on the peninsula, within acceptable limits and developing at the site could mean up to 14 Aboriginal communities would need to be relocated to prevent risks to about 200 residents.

Eco-tourism ventures, fishing grounds and Aboriginal heritage sites would also be affected by a hub at North Head, which was a significant area for migrating, calving and resting for whales.

"Based on environmental considerations, the EPA is of the view that North Head is not a desirable location for large-scale industrial development," the report said.

EPA chairman Paul Vogel said the watchdog supported a single site for a gas hub and once a location was selected by the Government, a further environmental assessment would be required.

Opposition Leader Eric Ripper accused Mr Barnett, who was touring the North Head and James Price Point sites yesterday and will announce the location of the hub in the next few days, of a reckless disregard for due process and a develop-at-all-costs approach.

"This process has been derailed by the Premier expressing his personal preference for sites without regard for established stakeholder consultation processes," Mr Ripper said.

A spokesman for Woodside Petroleum, which wants to announce the preferred onshore location for its Browse Basin gas project by the end of this month, would not comment on the EPA's report, saying it would wait until the Government

announced its preferred site.

“It remains that we were comfortable with the two sites identified on the Dampier Peninsula,” he said.

Environmental groups and the Broome Shire Council have called on the Government to investigate the alternative of developing the gas hub in an established industrial area such as the Pilbara, which was not considered in the EPA’s report.

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