

Barnett refuses to rule out North Head gas hub

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Colin Barnett has revealed he is still considering North Head as the site for the State's first LNG precinct, in a move that put him at odds with WA's environment watchdog which warned it could pose unmanageable environmental risks and force the closure of nearby Aboriginal communities.

The Premier said yesterday that the report released by the Environmental Protection Authority last week was only one aspect of his considerations, which needed to be balanced with social, cultural, land and technical issues.

"It's fair to say it's basically come down to North Head or James Price Point and that's why I wanted to visit those two sites," he said.

"The EPA report is one factor, an important factor . . . certainly I have taken it into account.

"Some would say North Head is well away from Broome and that's an advantage, but others would say James Price Point is a bit too close to Broome so there are a whole host of factors and that's what is being weighed up at the moment."

In what was expected to be a major blow to Mr Barnett's preferred site of North Head, the EPA released advice warning that the location, 125km north of Broome, would also interfere with a humpback whale breeding ground.

Both of the Premier's preferred sites are expected to face widespread revolt, with conservation groups, some indigenous groups and the Broome Shire Council opposing the development on the environmentally sensitive Dampier Peninsula.

Conservation Council of WA director Piers Verstegen said he was concerned Mr Barnett appeared to be committed to naming a site by Christmas, even though the joint strategic assessment, which would consider other areas including the Pilbara, had not been completed.

A group of local indigenous, environmental and business groups, named the Kimberley Accord, said it was integral the strategic assessment was completed before any decision was made because "short-sighted" decision-making could spell disaster for the region.

Broome Shire Council president Graeme Campbell said the council had passed a motion declaring it was opposed to the LNG hub being built on the coastline within its boundaries.

Conservation group WWF warned that part of the organisation's turtle tracking program was closing in on the Dampier Peninsula, with a second turtle tracked by satellite from Indonesia to the Kimberley in less than a year.

"LNG development can involve the dredging of millions of cubic metres of rock which can smother and choke seagrass beds and coral reefs. Boating traffic and blasting can disturb and harm turtles, dugong and whales," WWF program leader Paul Gamblin said.

The matter will be discussed in Cabinet today but a decision is not expected until at least tomorrow.

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