

Better environment for long-term development

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THE Howard Government will move to provide development certainty for major projects by creating 30- to 40-year development plans in highly sensitive areas under a radical overhaul of heritage laws.

The changes, to be introduced this week, will enable the state and federal governments to negotiate broad environmental outcomes in advance, ending the current situation where major developers are forced to repeatedly seek new commonwealth approvals as they upgrade their projects.

The proposed changes to the Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act give the federal environment minister greater power over heritage listings, and give states more flexibility and developers more certainty.

The changes are expected to be introduced to parliament later this week.

The new laws would also allow ministers to overrule individual public nominations for heritage listing and give government schemes priority. Nominations for heritage listing would also fall under the minister's power.

The new act is expected to allow the commonwealth to speed up the approval, within national heritage guidelines, of the \$5billion gas plant on Western Australia's Burrup Peninsula, which is threatening Aboriginal rock art.

Greens leader Bob Brown has accused the Government of hypocrisy by calling for Papua New Guinea to defer goldmining plans to protect the Kokoda Track but allowing the gas plant to damage the Burrup Aboriginal rock carvings.

The plant, which has the support of the West Australian Government, is being delayed while national heritage listing is considered.

Federal Environment Minister Ian Campbell told the Senate yesterday that he hoped to make a decision on the gasplant and rock art as part of a long-term plan.

He said it was the aim of the federal and state governments "to see a very sound and sensible management plan put in place that will deliver for Australia and the world a range of benefits from that incredibly important region".

"It is also the home of a multi-billion-dollar industry based around not only the natural gas that flows off the North West Shelf of Western Australia but also the iron ore that comes out of that province and is shipped through the port at Dampier," Senator Campbell said.

"I want to work with the state Government to put a protection regime in place, a management plan in place, which will ensure that there is minimal interruption or damage done to the rock art, but also that we ... do not put any new impediments in the way of development of the Burrup Peninsula and, particularly, the natural gas exports."