

Clearance query may stall Pluto

Paul Garvey

The West Australian government will hold emergency talks with an Aboriginal group, led by former state premier Peter Dowding, that it believes can stall Woodside Petroleum's \$12 billion Pluto gas project.

The Ngarluma Aboriginal Corp believes the state government has erred in the heritage clearance process for the multibillion-dollar project, which will be built on the Burrup Peninsula.

The group also argues that the energy giant Woodside and the state government need to invest more in social programs in the Pilbara region, which is in the north-west of the state.

While the agreement that governs development across the Burrup Peninsula requires a representative of the area's four indigenous groups to be paid for heritage survey work, Ngarluma chairwoman Jill Churnside said the corporation had not authorised any of its members to carry out that work.

The state government has defended the integrity of the clearances, saying they were obtained in accordance with the Aboriginal Heritage Act and the Burrup and Maitland Industrial Estate Agreement (BMIEA), which effectively replaced native title rights over the economically strategic region.

"Woodside and the state government have been hiding the fact they do not have the approvals in place for the Pluto project construction, and they're hiding that fact as they desperately try to work out a solution," Mr Dowding, a lawyer representing the Ngarluma on a pro bono basis who served as premier of WA from 1988 to 1990, told *The Australian Financial Review*.

The BMIEA has been a source of frustration for the Ngarluma amid accusations that the funds that flow into the controlling body – which is controlled by rival Aboriginal groups – are not evenly distributed throughout the area's various Aboriginal groups.

A spokesperson for the government said it would attempt to resolve the Ngarluma's concerns in a meeting with representatives of the Ngarluma next week.

"The BMIEA Additional Deed only obliges the state to ensure that surveys are conducted over the survey area. Woodside conducted the surveys for the Pluto area, [and] they complied with the requirements of the BMIEA Additional Deed," the spokesperson said.

Ms Churnside, a signatory to the original BMIEA, is opposed to the development of industry on the peninsula due to the threat posed to

its historic rock art, which is among the oldest anywhere in the world.

She is also critical of what she says is the "parsimonious" approach of the companies in the Burrup towards investing in indigenous social issues in the region.

Mr Dowding said that rather than chasing "sitdown money", the Ngarluma wanted increased investment in cultural preservation, Aboriginal home ownership and better schooling, particularly for disadvantaged Aboriginal children – initiatives, he said, that had been neglected under the existing Burrup agreement.

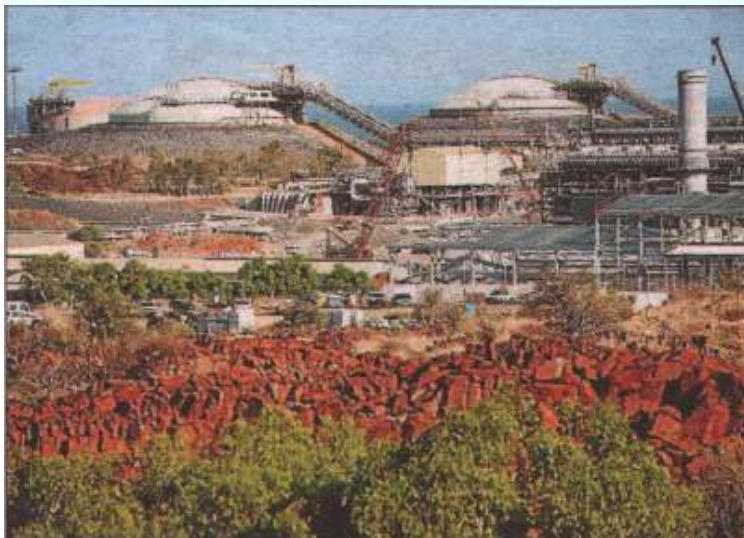
A spokesman for Woodside said he was unaware of the challenge to Pluto and construction of the project was already under way.

The board of Woodside gave formal approval for the project last July.

The former federal environment minister, Malcolm Turnbull, gave environmental approval last October on the eve of the federal election.

KEY POINTS

- The state government defends the integrity of the heritage clearances.
- Construction of Woodside's multibillion-dollar Pluto gas project already is under way.



There's opposition to industry development on the peninsula.

Photo: ERIN JONASSON