

Attention: News Editor/Chief of Staff

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Premature Aboriginal heritage decision reveals administration in chaos

- The Minister for Aboriginal Affairs has provided consent for the destruction of Aboriginal Heritage without considering important site information
- Minister's advisory committee recommended site destruction, and granted approval for work to determine area's significance, at the same meeting
- Traditional Owners have applied to the Commonwealth Minister for Environment, seeking an emergency declaration to protect the area

The Wintawari Guruma Aboriginal Corporation is seeking an emergency declaration from the Commonwealth Government to protect a highly significant Aboriginal heritage area near Karijini National Park in the Central Pilbara, following the failure of the State Government to properly consider important information.

In May 2017, the Fortescue Metals Group (FMG) applied to the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs for consent to destroy 50 Eastern Guruma heritage sites within an area known as Spear Hill, an area used by Aboriginal people for culture activities and ceremonies for more than 10,000 years.

In July 2017, the Minister's advisory body, the Aboriginal Cultural Material Committee (ACMC), met to consider the FMG application. On the same day, the ACMC considered an application by Wintawari Guruma for consent to undertake site works to determine the importance and significance of the area, including the age of the sites.

A recommendation to approve impact to the sites was granted, in addition to consent for further work to determine their significance, at the one meeting. The Minister finally granted consent to impact the sites in November 2017, despite not having the report that will detail the importance and significance of the area.

Without Commonwealth intervention, the Spear Hill sites will be destroyed to facilitate a 130km extension of FMG's existing rail line, from its Solomon Hub to planned mining operations at Eliwana.

The Wintawari Guruma Aboriginal Corporation Chairman Glen Camille said that despite the Traditional Owners pragmatic approach to balancing economic development and Aboriginal heritage protection, the State Government have bungled the statutory process that affords 'fairness' to proponents and Aboriginal people.

"Eastern Guruma are beneficiaries of mining but FMG's current expansion to facilitate Eliwana must have consideration for our cultural heritage places," he said.

"The facts are clear. On the same day, that ACMC and the Department for Planning, Lands and Heritage provided us with required permits to allow work to determine document the significance of the area, to help inform the Ministers' decision on the FMG application, whilst also discussing, and then recommending to the Minister, the FMG should be granted consent to impact these sites."

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“At best, this reflects administrative chaos within the ACMC and the Department. If it’s not chaos, it is deceit.”

“We are not opposing the planned mining operations at Eliwana. We are simply asking FMG to realign less than 1.5% of the planned railway to avoid an area of unique significance to the Eastern Guruma people.”

“The work being undertaken, at great expense, to inform the Minister of the significance of the area has not been considered.”

“The Minister needs to be clear about why this decision was made prior to March 1, 2018, which was the agreed deadline for the submission of the report. Did he receive bad advice, or was he pushed by those at the top end of the Terrace.”

The Commonwealth Minister is scheduled to decide on the application imminently.

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