

# Environment minister requests work pause on \$4.5b Pilbara urea plant

By [Peter de Kruijff](#) and [Marta Pascual Juanola](#)  
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Federal Environment Minister Tanya Plibersek has asked a chemical company to hold off works on a \$4.5 billion urea plant in the Pilbara which will disturb rock art at a World Heritage-nominated site while she considers appeals from Traditional Owners.

Perdaman received approval last week from the West Australian government to start work on the plant located at the Burrup Peninsula, also known as Murujuga, which is also home to more than 1 million petroglyphs with some believed to have been crafted more than 30,000 years ago.

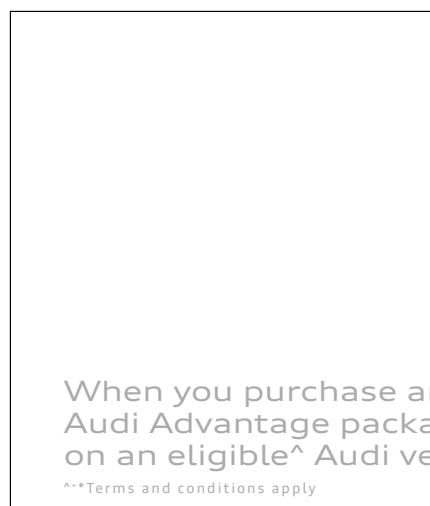


Environment Minister Tanya Plibersek has asked Perdaman to pause work on its \$4.5 billion urea plant on the Burrup Peninsula. ALEX ELLINGHAUSEN

res Strait Islander Heritage Protection Act. If approved, the application could halt work at the site for 60 days.

A section 9 is an emergency declaration over an area which can be enacted if the minister receives an appeal from Aboriginal people seeking to protect a significant area under immediate threat from desecration.

Former Murujuga Aboriginal Corporation chair and Mardudhunera custodian Raelene Cooper and Kuruma Marduthunera woman Josie Alec say several pieces of rock art, including a panel with a sacred motif, would be moved to make way for the plant which was an act of desecration.



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The pair have written to both Plibersek and the previous government about stopping the urea plant seeking action under section 9 and section 10 of the act.

Former Environment Minister Sussan Ley approved, under section 10 of the law, for someone to be appointed to prepare a report assessing the impact of industry, which includes gas and fertiliser plants, on the cultural heritage of the peninsula.

But Cooper and Alec say no one has been appointed yet.

Burney told RN Breakfast the government was taking the matter “absolutely seriously”, particularly in the wake of the Juukan Gorge disaster where mining giant Rio Tinto destroyed 46,000-year-old rock shelters in the Pilbara in 2020.

“Juukan was a massive wake-up call. Not just within Australia, but the outcry was from around the world and I think that was very much listened to,” she said.

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“It has moved the dial substantially in Australia about the importance of Aboriginal cultural heritage. That is all our heritage and it is the oldest in the world.”

Burney said the proliferation of rock art in the peninsula was astounding.

“The actual term that you hear from First Nations people that the land is talking to me is absolutely felt there,” she said.

“It’s a living breathing thing when it comes to First Nations people and that’s the importance of heritage.”

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Murujuga Aboriginal Corporation chief executive Peter Jeffries [said on Tuesday the organisation had no role in providing support or approval of the project](#) with the development located in an area zoned for industry uses.

“It was ultimately determined that a number of sites could not be avoided by the proposed development and it was the strong preference of the Circle of Elders that if the development were to go ahead, then these sites should be relocated to an area outside of the development footprint,” he said.

“MAC’s only role is to provide advice and recommendations regarding any heritage or cultural values that may be impacted by the proposed works.

“Perdaman have consulted extensively with MAC and the Circle of Elders throughout the planning process for the construction of the urea plant at Murujuga.

“Every effort was made to avoid impact to any archaeological sites and cultural values present within the industry zoned lease areas.”

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Perdaman declined to comment on the minister's intervention.

Alec said she was relieved the minister had intervened so work could be paused while she considered the appeals.

“However, that is only a short-term stopgap and we have been sidelined and silenced many times before,” she said.

“In the meantime, approval for more industry on the Burrup for another 50 years will ensure the complete destruction of our sacred rock art and songlines before industry is finished polluting Murujuga and the world.”

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Alec and Cooper will also lodge an appeal on Thursday against a 50-year extension to the North West Shelf project that was recommended by the WA Environmental Protection Authority earlier this month.

About 4.3 billion tonnes of carbon would be emitted over the extended life of the facility, which is already Australia's most polluting project.

So far a record 499 appeals have been lodged with the WA appeals convenor against the EPA recommendations with the time for applications set to close on Thursday.

The Burrup is the most industrialised area in WA's north and is home to Rio Tinto's iron ore port, Woodside's North West Shelf and Pluto LNG plants, and ammonia and explosive plants run by Norwegian company Yara.

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