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Major Australian gas project extended until 2070

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The project is located in Western Australia

The lifetime of one of Australia's largest fossil fuel projects has officially been extended by four decades to 2070.

The extension for the North West Shelf comes days before the federal government is expected to announce its emissions reduction targets for 2035.

One of the world's biggest polluters per capita, Australia has pledged to reduce emissions by 43% by 2030, but is criticised for continuing to heavily rely on fossil fuels.

Critics say the extension hurts global climate goals, but Environment Minister Murray Watt said it includes dozens of new "strict conditions" - oil and gas giant Woodside Energy must reduce certain gas emissions from the project by 2030 and reach net zero by 2050.

He added that there were also new safeguards in place to protect ancient Indigenous rock art in Western Australia's Pilbara region.

Woodside Energy chief operation officer Liz Westcott welcomed the extension, saying the company can continue providing "reliable energy as it has for more than 40 years".

Woodside's licence for the North West Shelf was due to expire in 2030, but the extension received preliminary approval in May. The project covers a processing and export plant at Karratha, which is close to the 60,000-year-old World Heritage-listed Murujuga rock art.

"In making this decision, I have imposed 48 strict conditions that will avoid and mitigate significant impacts to the Murujuga rock art," Watt said on Friday.

The conditions will ensure the project will "not cause unacceptable impacts" to the heritage site "including restricting air emissions which otherwise could have accelerated damage".

It also includes a legal requirement for the industry to consult with Indigenous communities on how to protect the area and a "robust" monitoring system to show the company is complying with the emissions limits.

Watt also announced further protections for the heritage site, with extra legal protections under a so-called "partial declaration".

Peter Hicks, chair of the Murujuga Aboriginal Corporation, welcomed the extra protections for an area of "great significance" to Indigenous people.

"This extraordinary landscape has been managed and cared for by our ancestors for more than 50,000 years and is a sacred, spiritual and deeply storied place," he said.

Climate groups that opposed the extension, including the Australian Conservation Foundation, say the project is a "carbon bomb" that will hinder global efforts to reduce rising temperatures.

The leader of the Australian Greens Larissa Waters said it was a "betrayal and disastrous decision for the future of the planet".

In recent years, Australia has grappled with successive natural disasters, and climate experts warn that the country - along with the rest of the globe - faces a future full of similar crises unless dramatic cuts to emissions are achieved.

Australia's Prime Minister Anthony Albanese came to power in 2022, promising to take greater action, but his Labor government has been criticised for its continued support of coal and gas projects.

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