

Explosives company will let workers refuse to blast if they fear damaging Indigenous heritage

Dyno Nobel announcement comes days after a similar decision by competitor Orica and a year after Rio Tinto blew up Juukan Gorge



File photo of Juukan Gorge before being destroyed. Dyno Nobel says workers will be supported if they refuse to work due to an unacceptable risk, including to Indigenous heritage.

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Explosives company Dyno Nobel has changed its blasting policies to allow workers to call a halt if they fear damaging Indigenous heritage at mining sites.

The move by Dyno, a division of Australian company Incitec Pivot that works with big miner BHP, follows a similar decision by its main competitor, Orica, last week.

It comes a year after Rio Tinto blew up 46,000-year-old rock shelters at Juukan Gorge in the Pilbara in order to mine higher quality iron ore – a decision that ultimately led to a parliamentary inquiry and the departure of top brass, including the company's chief executive.

James Fitzgerald, who works for the Australasian Centre for Corporate Responsibility but was previously for more than two decades a native title lawyer, said the move by the two big explosives companies was “incredibly important”.

“So far there has been no convincing answer to, ‘How do you stop another Juukan Gorge happening?’” he said.

“If people have got the ability to stand up to that kind of unbridled greed, it’s really important.”

An Incitec Pivot spokeswoman said the change affected its “refusal to work” policy, which allows employees and contractors to refuse to blast if doing so would be a safety risk.

“While it was always intended that the policy’s definition includes our environment and surrounding communities, including Indigenous cultural heritage, we identified that this could be clearer in the policy,” she said.

“Accordingly, the policy was reviewed and recently updated to explicitly include any instance where an employee believes an unacceptable risk is presented to Indigenous cultural heritage.

“We work hard to create a culture where our people know they will be supported if they speak up and refuse to work due to an unacceptable risk, including work that risks Indigenous cultural heritage.”

Fitzgerald said that it was not just traditional owners who suffered when Indigenous heritage was destroyed.

“It’s staff as well,” he said.

“They’re put in the unconscionable position of either losing their job or doing something they believe is wrong.”

In September, Rio Tinto announced its chief executive, Jean-Sébastien Jacques, iron ore head, Chris Salisbury, and corporate affairs boss, Simone Niven, would leave the company after investors piled on the pressure for executives to be held accountable for the decision to blow up Juukan Gorge.

Rio blew up Juukan Gorge in May last year. It was one of the oldest sites in the Western Pilbara and showed signs of continual human occupation since the last Ice Age.

The company has since repeatedly apologised for the decision and promised that it will overhaul its relationship with traditional owner groups.