

Gomeri traditional owners vote against agreement with Santos for Narrabri gas project

Court hearing will determine if Santos can progress coal seam gas development without consent of native title claimants



The New South Wales and federal governments approved Santos' Narrabri gas project in 2020 but the lands targeted are subject to native title claim.

Lisa Cox

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Gomeri traditional owners have voted overwhelmingly against entering into an agreement with Santos for its Narrabri gas project on the eve of a court hearing to decide if the project can go ahead without their consent.

Santos has launched proceedings in the national native title tribunal to progress the 850-well coal seam gas project in north-west New South Wales without agreement from the Gomeri People.

The case will be heard over four days of hearings starting next week.

The NSW and federal governments approved the Narrabri gas project in 2020.

The lands targeted for gas production are subject to a native title claim, meaning Santos requires either an agreement with Gomeri traditional owners or a determination by the national native title tribunal.

Santos filed an application for a determination by the tribunal in May last year.

It put an offer to Gomeroi traditional owners last month, seeking their consent for the project in exchange for a compensation package.

The traditional owners voted 162 to two, with four abstentions, to reject the proposed deal.

Raymond “Bubbly” Weatherall is one of 18 Gomeroi people who make up a representative body of the native title claimants.

He said he did not think Santos had presented a fair agreement or negotiated in good faith.

“Our land is worth more than money,” he said.

“The spiritual and physical connection that we have to our country far outweighs any money any proponent can offer.”

Weatherall said although the native title process did not allow for veto rights, the nearly unanimous vote was an indication of the level of opposition to the development.

Traditional owners, community organisations and unions will hold a rally near the federal court in Sydney on Friday – the day hearings were originally due to commence in Brisbane – opposing the gas field.

Gomeroi woman Suellyn Tighe said she was concerned about the effects the project would have on the environment of the Pilliga forest, water and cultural sites.

“When it comes down to it, the destruction of the environment, cultural sites and spiritually important places will affect our cultural wellbeing,” she said.

“Generations won’t be able to go see these places – particularly in the Pilliga – that are important for cultural practices.”

A spokesperson for Santos said the company “has been engaging and working constructively with the Gomeroi community since 2012, and will continue to do so”.

“Santos will respect the decision of the national native title tribunal,” they said.

But Gomeroi man Boe Spearim said traditional owners wanted Santos to walk away and people were prepared to “continue to fight and do as much as possible to halt any destruction of country”.

“Our goal would be that Santos get out of Gomeroi country,” he said.