

Australia Court Dismisses Doctors' Challenge to Woodside Gas Project Approval

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The Federal Court has rejected a legal challenge brought by Doctors for the Environment Australia (DEA) against the approval of Woodside Energy's Scarborough gas development, one of the country's largest offshore projects. The environmental group argued that the National Offshore Petroleum Safety and Environmental Management Authority (NOPSEMA) erred in approving Woodside's environmental plan, claiming

it failed to provide adequate detail on greenhouse gas emissions and mitigation measures.

Justice Shaun McElwaine dismissed the case, ruling that the court's role was not to judge the technical merit of the plan but to determine whether NOPSEMA acted within its legal authority. He found that the regulator had the discretion to approve the plan under Australia's offshore environmental framework, which places decision-making power primarily with the regulator rather than the judiciary.

DEA, which represents medical professionals concerned about climate and environmental health impacts, contended that the plan's lack of specificity undermined efforts to address emissions and protect fragile marine ecosystems. The group stressed that fossil fuel expansion conflicts with the country's emissions reduction commitments and contributes to broader health risks associated with climate change.

The decision is a setback for environmental advocates, coming amid a series of legal efforts to curb Woodside's projects in Western Australia. The company is simultaneously facing two other legal actions: one led by the Friends of Australian Rock Art, challenging the proposed extension of the North West Shelf project to 2070, and another involving traditional owners seeking protection of Indigenous heritage sites. Both cases focus on the environmental and cultural impacts of long-term gas extraction in ecologically and culturally sensitive areas.

Woodside welcomed the ruling, stating that it affirms the strength of its environmental planning and regulatory compliance. The company highlighted Scarborough as one of the lowest carbon-intensive liquefied natural gas projects supplying Asian markets. It emphasised its

commitment to meeting environmental standards and contributing to energy security.

The Scarborough project, located off the coast of Western Australia, has been the subject of intense scrutiny due to its scale and potential emissions footprint. Environmental groups argue that new gas developments undermine global and national climate targets, while industry and government supporters claim such projects are essential for economic growth and regional energy supply.

The broader debate over Australia's gas sector has intensified as policymakers balance emissions reduction pledges with resource exports, which remain a key driver of the economy. The court's ruling underscores the challenges environmental groups face in using legal mechanisms to halt fossil fuel projects, particularly when regulators are granted significant discretion under existing laws.

While DEA's challenge has ended, attention now turns to the remaining cases, which could test the limits of environmental and heritage protections in the face of large-scale resource developments. The outcomes may influence how future projects are assessed and approved, and whether calls for stronger climate and cultural safeguards gain more traction in Australia's energy policy landscape.