

Approaches Taken to Navigate Conflicting Economic, Social and Environmental Aspects: A Case Study from Exmouth Gulf, Western Australia

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Summary

Subsea 7 Australia Contracting Pty Ltd (Subsea 7) proposes to construct and operate a pipeline 'Bundle' facility at Learmonth, on the shores of Exmouth Gulf, WA. The area is recognized as supporting high environmental and social values, and a strong celebrity-led and social media-supported public opposition campaign was launched against the development. Comprehensive site surveys and the development of robust and development-specific environmental management measures have supported the progression of the proposal through the environmental approvals process. Through the careful design of the facility, impacts to the commercial and recreational use of the Learmonth area have also been minimised.

Keywords: Exmouth Gulf, environmental approvals, marine fauna, public opposition

Introduction

Subsea 7 proposes to construct a novel, state of the art, pipeline 'Bundle' construction facility (the Proposal) at Learmonth, WA. The Proposal presents an opportunity to bring significant volumes of offshore gas field development work back onshore, thus providing local employment opportunities and generating local revenue. Currently this work occurs offshore, leading to extensive offshore vessel operations and the loss of revenue overseas.

Significant public opposition to the Proposal was generated through a focussed campaign by Protect Ningaloo, culminating in an unprecedented 55,858 public submissions in response to the environmental assessment documentation [1]. For context, this exceeds the volume of submissions received in response to the highly publicised Browse Liquid Natural Gas (LNG) Precinct (11,000) and Roe Highway Extension ('Roe 8') (3,000). This attention resulted in additional work being required and significant delays to the environmental approvals process.

Main body

A pipeline 'Bundle' co-locates a number of services within a single pipeline, which is constructed onshore before being launched and towed offshore to the gas field under development. Once manufactured to its desired length and pressure tested, each Bundle pipeline would be launched down a 'launchway', similar to a low-profile groyne, and towed offshore by tugs prior to being submerged on arrival at the offshore gas field.

An initial wide field of potential development sites from Learmonth (Exmouth Gulf) in the south to the Browse LNG Precinct (Kimberley) in the north was narrowed down to two sites. Bathymetric and benthic habitat surveys were completed in late 2016 for the two short-listed development sites: Anketell

Point (near Karratha) and Learmonth (Exmouth). These surveys indicated that Anketell Point was unsuitable, and Learmonth was determined to be the only feasible site (Figure 1).

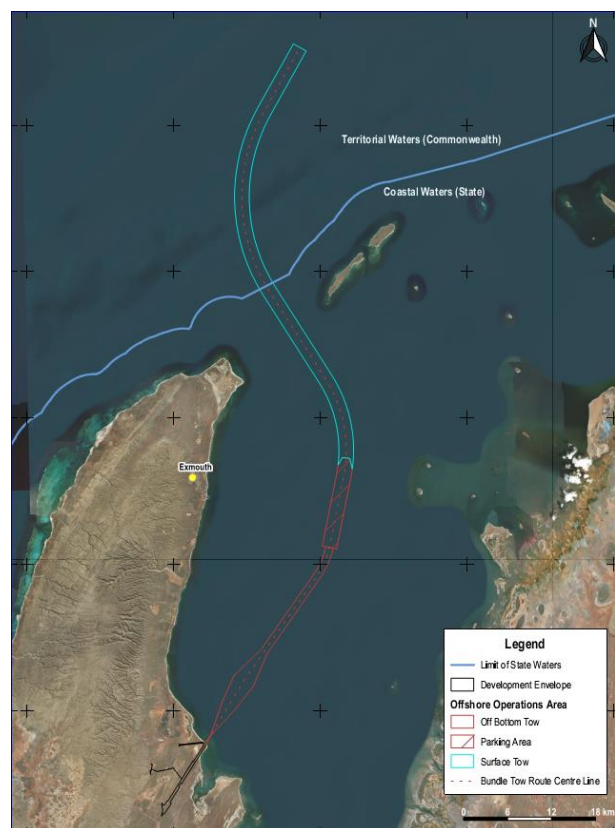


Figure 1: Learmonth development site and tow route

Initial surveys off Learmonth in 2016 did not record 'high value' or sensitive habitat (i.e. seagrass beds or coral reefs) in proximity to the proposed development site [2].

Subsea 7 completed further terrestrial and marine surveys at Learmonth and in Exmouth Gulf through 2017 and 2018. Mapping of benthic communities adjacent to the tow route was also completed [3]. At

no time did the surveys identify previously unknown ecosystems, fauna habitats or other significant environmental values.

Exmouth Gulf and the adjacent waters are known to support significant marine fauna populations, including marine turtles, dolphins, Humpback Whales and Whale Sharks. Aerial surveys were completed to confirm the use of Exmouth Gulf by Humpback Whales during the southern migration period, representing the first comprehensive surveys since 2004/05 [4]. To mitigate the risk of impact to Humpback Whales, Subsea 7 defined a three month 'no launch' period, coinciding with the peak of the southern migration. Proposed mitigation for impacts to other marine fauna included low vessel speeds, use of a 'spotter plane' during the Whale Shark season and the deployment of marine fauna observers on all tow and support vessels.

The public advertising of the Proposal in October 2017, marked the beginning of a sustained campaign by Protect Ningaloo, with affiliations with the Cape Conservation Group, Marine Conservation Society and Wilderness Society, to generate significant public opposition to the Proposal with the aim of preventing it from proceeding. Protect Ningaloo employed a number of approaches including seeking celebrity endorsement of the campaign and creating intensive social media coverage (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Examples of media use by the Protect Ningaloo campaign

Subsequent public comment periods through the environmental approvals process attracted increasing numbers of submissions. The Protect Ningaloo campaign was promoted in printed media,

on free to air television and at community events and concerts.

The region is a very popular holiday destination for people from WA, Interstate and overseas. Every year, during the cooler winter months, the population in Exmouth triples due to short-term or seasonal visitors [5]. In response to community concerns regarding the ability to access the Learmonth coastline (including the nearby Bay of Rest) following construction of the facility, Subsea 7 redesigned the proposed launchway to allow four wheel drive vehicles to cross over the structure and transit along the coast.

Modelling of the economic contribution from the Proposal predicted that it would directly contribute an average of \$20.6 m per annum to the WA economy [6]. A further \$24.5 m per annum was predicted to result from the Proposal indirectly. It was estimated that the Proposal would directly support an average of 40 full time equivalent (FTE) jobs per year [6].

Discussion and Conclusion

The high level of public opposition to the Proposal resulted in significant delays to the environmental approvals process and led to the State government having to allocate significantly increased resources to the process.

The development of robust and development-specific environmental management measures is considered pivotal to maintaining the progression of the Proposal through the environmental approvals process.

The general public remains strongly opposed to the Proposal despite the environmental surveys and assessments forecasting no significant impacts, while the local community is more supportive but divided by the Proposal.

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