

# EPA cloud over iron ore mining

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EXCLUSIVE**

Hopes for the Mid-West region to become WA's next big iron ore producer were dealt a blow yesterday when the environmental watchdog recommended mining be banned in neighbouring ranges rich in the valuable ore.

The Environmental Protection Authority found potentially lucrative deposits, known as banded ironstone formations, in the Mt Manning reserve near Southern Cross, should be quarantined from mining.

While the recommendation aims to put these deposits out of the reach of mining, it has fuelled concerns that vast iron ore reserves of the same geological nature in the adjoining Mid-West could also soon be quarantined.

The Mid-West region, which sits between Mt Manning and the iron-ore mecca of the Pilbara, is known to contain huge iron ore reserves and has long been seen as WA's next mining frontier. But much of it is in banded ironstone formations, which also have unique and rare flora and fauna that is heavily protected by the EPA.

The EPA's recommendation is designed to protect some of the unique landscape and surrounding areas by dramatically expanding the Mt Manning A-Class reserve in the Yilgarn region.

The watchdog recommended more than doubling the size of the reserve and conservation park to more than 800,000ha with about half quarantined from mining.

It was the second time in less than a year the EPA has recommended

against mining a banded ironstone formation, prompting Geraldton Iron-Ore Alliance spokesman Rob Jefferies to express concern about an emerging trend against mining in the area. "The EPA is pushing for conservation in these areas which could have implications . . . for our members who are planning to mine these areas well into the future," he said.

Mr Jefferies called on the State Government to consider economic and social consequences before quarantining large areas from the resources sector.

EPA deputy chairwoman Andrea Hinwood said recent research revealed the true extent of the environmental importance of the ranges. The Mt Manning region alone had about 80 rare plant species.

"The banded ironstone formations

are extremely important from an environmental perspective . . . and the advice we are providing on the Mt Manning conservation reserve is an indication of just how important BIF's are," Ms Hinwood said. "Proposals would have to have environmental issues assessed very carefully."

Conservation Council spokesman Chris Tallentire said the unique ranges and rare plants were under threat from mining in the Mid-West and Yilgarn so the move was welcome.

If accepted, the recommendation would not stop existing mining by Portman Mines but would stop further expansion. In 2002, Portman's plan to mine the Windaring Range and Mt Jackson tenements at Koolyanobbing within the area was held up when the EPA opposed it. The State Government then overruled the EPA.