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Hunt won't stop rail project for artefacts

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Federal Environment Minister Greg Hunt has rejected an urgent request to stop work on a section of Sydney's \$2.1 billion light rail project where tens of thousands of Aboriginal artefacts have been unearthed.

Three weeks ago Aboriginal elders and heritage experts appealed to the Environment Minister to make a stopwork order at the site. They wanted him to use powers under Section 9 of the Aboriginal Heritage Protection Act 1984 to protect the site's Indigenous heritage. However, Mr Hunt has decided against ordering a halt because he is not satisfied it is a significant Aboriginal area and under serious and immediate threat of desecration. "In this case I am unable to make a declaration under section 9 of the Act as I am not satisfied that the area specified ... is a significant Aboriginal area, as defined," he wrote in a letter to NSW Greens MP David Shoebridge, who made the request for a halt to work on behalf of the elders and heritage experts.

Mr Shoebridge claims excavation on the site near the corner of Alison Road and Doncaster Avenue in Randwick has "already likely destroyed thousands of artefacts, which have been crushed and damaged by heavy machinery".

"The artefacts are important because they show what an important site this is," he said on Monday.

The site is planned as a stabling yard for the trams that will run on the light rail line between Sydney's CBD and Randwick and Kensington in the eastern suburbs when it opens in 2019.

Scott Franks, whose company was contracted to advise on Indigenous heritage for the light rail project, said he was appalled at the process for excavating the artefacts, partly because any opportunity for resin or DNA analysis would be lost. "It would be one of the most significant finds this country has ever seen," he said. "This is absolutely appalling."

Mr Franks, who was also a party to the appeal to the Environment Minister, said about 24,000 artefacts had been discovered already and a further 30,000 were expected to be unearthed. However, the La Perouse Local Aboriginal Land Council, one of four groups providing heritage advice on the light rail project, said most of the stone material excavated had been small offcuts from the "resharpening practice of our people when making tools and weapons", rather than axe heads or spearheads.

The council's chief executive, Chris Ingrey, said he was comfortable the excavation work was being done in accordance with approved guidelines under state heritage laws. "When we look at the artefacts that are coming out [of the site], the cultural

significance is not as high as they have been made out to be," he said. "At the moment, we are just seeing offcuts of stone material. The cultural significance is not there. We take the side of cultural significance when we consider this type of work."

The Land Council said the area was known to be a campsite linked to a nearby "payback ground" used by Aborigines up until the early 1880s to uphold traditional law.

Transport for NSW said the area of historic Aboriginal interest was less than 200 square metres on a site for the tram yards measuring more than 20,000 sq m. "We have met regularly with the Aboriginal groups to discuss works and protection of the area and we gave all Aboriginal groups the option to supervise all work that is taking place at the site," a spokeswoman said. "It is critical that the artefacts are extracted delicately and respectfully and we are making sure that area is accessed sensitively."

She said the removal of the artefacts and the work on the light rail project could occur simultaneously, "minimising risk to the artefacts".

Darug elder, Uncle Des Dyer said last month it was difficult to teach people about his culture when he "can't take people to places where they learn it" such as the Moreton Bay fig tree adjacent to the excavation which bore burial markings.