



Fortescue Metals Group's Pilbara mining activity compared to alcohol abuse in court testimony

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NEWS

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Highlight: As hearings in a \$500-plus million compensation case against **Fortescue** Metals Group resume, a clinical psychologist says traditional owners report significant trauma associated with mining in their community.

Body

A clinical psychologist has compared the impact of alcohol abuse in a West Australian remote community with the effects of mining on culture and heritage.

The [landmark legal battle](#) between the Yindjibarndi Aboriginal Corporation (YAC) and Andrew Forrest's mining giant **Fortescue** Metals Group (FMG) resumed in the Federal Court this week.

Traditional owners [are seeking](#) more than \$500 million in unpaid royalties and interest as well as damages for cultural and spiritual losses allegedly caused by mining.

The **Fortescue** operation at the centre of the issue is the highly profitable Solomon hub, which is in the state's north and has reportedly produced about \$50 billion in iron ore since 2013.

But the miner has never had an Indigenous land use agreement with Yindjibarndi people, who have held native title over much of the area since 2017, meaning the miner was essentially digging without permission.

YAC has claimed [some of these cultural losses](#) were caused by FMG's decision to back a splinter group known as the Wirlu-murra Yindjibarndi Aboriginal Corporation to help progress its mining ambitions.

Miner's impact comparable to alcohol: psychologist

During a hearing on Tuesday, clinical psychologist Jeff Nelson, an Aboriginal man from Cairns, told the court the impact of mining on Yindjibarndi people could be compared to the social impacts of heavy drinking.

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Many Yindjibarndi people live in the small town of Roebourne, which had a long history of social issues and alcohol abuse connected to the local Victoria Hotel, now closed.

The building has since been reclaimed by the Yindjibarndi community and used as a cultural centre.

"The Yindjibarndi closed down the Vic Hotel ... which definitely slowed down the intake of alcohol, [but] they can't just say no to the ongoing mining that's happening at Solomon Hub," Dr Nelson said.

"They undertook the step, even if the outcome wasn't as successful as they would have liked, they were proactive."

Dr Nelson's full evidence was tendered as a written document and only elements of his evidence were talked about in open court, with his full evidence to be made public at a later date.

As part of his written evidence, Dr Nelson interviewed Yindjibarndi people, and he said in court they all described significant individual trauma, which many connected to "the FMG experience".

Lawyers representing the WA government, which is also a respondent, questioned whether Dr Nelson could realistically gauge community views based on a relatively small number of interviews.

In response, Dr Nelson said many of the interviewees were community leaders and Yindjibarndi elders who could speak on behalf of the broader group.

Last year the [Federal Court heard evidence](#) on-country in the remote Pilbara from traditional owners about the toll the saga had taken on the community.

The trial is expected to hear more evidence in the coming weeks from a range of anthropological, environmental and economic experts.

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