



Media release - Monday October 13

Expert, independent and public: Call grows for a new approach to radioactive waste management

Australian civil society groups have called on the Federal Government to take a new approach to the vexed issue of radioactive waste management.

In an open letter to federal Industry Minister Ian Macfarlane national environment groups, the ACTU, public health and Aboriginal representatives have urged the Minister to move away from a search for a postcode for a remote dump in favour of a credible and open examination of the range of management options.

The groups' letter states:

For over two decades, successive Australian governments have sought to manage Australia's radioactive waste inventory through the development of a co-located remote central dump and store. This approach has repeatedly failed to win social license and has been characterised by division, contest and the inability of the Commonwealth to realise a site. There is no reason to think that repeating this approach in a new place would lead to a different outcome and seeking site nominations from communities that often suffer extensive economic disadvantage risks placing many in an invidious position. The approach taken to date on radioactive waste management has led to a polarisation of views and a lack of the consensus and discourse required to realise lasting solutions.

"As health practitioners we see that Australia now has both a real chance and the clear need to avoid another sweep it under the carpet response to our nuclear waste problem," said Dr Peter Tait of the Public Health Association of Australia.

"A national inquiry into the long term, responsible management of Australia's nuclear waste is overdue and necessary."

The Federal Government has indicated its intention to start a national search for a waste site from early November.

"Industrial waste and its management is a serious issue that requires genuine and open scrutiny. Everyone, including workers, gets a better result from a better decision making process," said Australian Council of Trade Unions President Ged Kearney.

The call for a review follows the failure of the federal plan to open a national radioactive waste site at Muckaty in the Northern Territory.

"The Muckaty community is the latest in a line of Aboriginal communities at multiple sites across South Australia and the NT who have taken action against remote dumping plans," said Natalie Wasley from the Beyond Nuclear Initiative. "The approach of the past two decades has failed to deliver and it is time for a new approach."

The majority of Australia's existing radioactive waste is currently stored at two secure federal sites. Waste set to return in 2015 from reprocessing in France is already slated for storage at one of these sites. The signatory groups see this as providing the federal government with an opportunity to do things differently and better.

"Radioactive waste is a difficult issue, but not an impossible one," said Australian Conservation Foundation spokesperson Dave Sweeney. "Radioactive waste lasts far longer than any politician so we need to get the management of this material right – the best way to do this is through open and evidence based policy and planning."

Further Comment:

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Full text of the letter to Minister Ian Macfarlane is available on request.

Signatories on the joint letter include:

Anti-Nuclear Alliance of Western Australia
Arid Lands Environment Centre
Australian Conservation Foundation
Australian Council of Trade Unions
Australian Nuclear Free Alliance
Beyond Nuclear Initiative
Conservation Council of Western Australia
Conservation Council of South Australia
Environment Centre of the Northern Territory
Environment Victoria
Friends of the Earth Australia
Footprints for Peace
North Queensland Conservation Council
People for Nuclear Disarmament WA
Public Health Association of Australia
Queensland Conservation Council
Queensland Nuclear Free Alliance
Unions NT
Western Australian Nuclear Free Alliance

