

MUCKATY – Dumping on the Territory

By Dr Peter Karamoskos

The proposed radioactive waste repository at Muckaty was determined less on scientific and public health criteria and more on opportunity. Indeed, Muckaty was not even identified as a preferred site in the NT in the original site selection process.

However, the contention that is most in error is that the radioactive waste to be disposed of there is largely nuclear medicine waste. Nearly all such waste is actually short-lived and decays in local storage and is subsequently disposed of safely in the normal waste systems without need for a repository.

Whilst some medical related radioactive waste requires appropriate disposal, it is only a very small proportion of the waste intended for the repository. The vast bulk of the waste that is intended to be disposed of at Muckaty is Lucas Heights nuclear reactor operational waste, and contaminated soil (10 thousand drums) from CSIRO research on ore processing in the 1950s and 1960s. This waste requires isolation from the environment for up to 300 years (deemed *low* level waste).

More hazardous waste (deemed *intermediate* level waste) arises from further Lucas Heights reactor operational waste, reprocessed spent fuel rods and residues from mineral sands processing

Intermediate level waste requires isolation from the environment for thousands of years, most usually in an engineered disposal site up to a few hundred metres underground, as specified by the “*Joint Convention on the Safety of Spent Fuel Management and on the Safety of Radioactive Waste Management*” a legally binding treaty of which Australia is a signatory we also participate in the development of these international safety standards. But, alarmingly, that is not what is intended. The government’s policy on the most hazardous radioactive waste in the country is to store (not dispose of it) it in a large above ground warehouse- indefinitely!

Contrary to the government spin therefore, the federal government’s policy on radioactive waste management is not a disposal solution to the most hazardous form of radioactive waste in Australia, intermediate level waste. This places the Australian Government in breach of its international treaty obligations, but more importantly does not eliminate the risks to humans and the environment. Territorians need to be aware that as long as the federal government continues to refuse to properly dispose of this waste, it follows that this policy introduces unnecessary risk to the Territory.

The Department of Resources, Energy and Trade (RET) was informed of this breach in 2008 by ARPANSA (Australian Radiation Protection and Nuclear Safety Agency). Nevertheless, it chose to dismiss both the expert advice and ARPANSA, stating, “RET sees this decision [indefinite storage of intermediate level waste] as one to be taken by proponents (RET) rather than regulatory agencies.” In other words, RET has chosen to deliberately ignore not only Australia’s own expert radiation regulator, but Australia’s international obligations, and in the process has demonstrated contempt for Territorians.

It is inexcusable that over almost thirty years and amongst all the political rancour and dishonesty, lack of transparency and accountability, and a questionable site selection process, the proposed solution is not a solution at all for the most hazardous radioactive waste in Australia.

The Medical Association for the Prevention of War firmly believes that Australia needs to dispose of its radioactive waste legacy appropriately and minimise further waste burdens on future generations based on international best practice and its legal obligations. The current process and legislation outcomes are flawed and do not provide this outcome.

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