

Committee Secretary, Senate Legal and Constitutional Committee. Inquiry into National Radioactive Waste Management Bill 2010

Between the years 2001 and 2006 I worked professionally for an international organisation campaigning against the expansion of the nuclear industry in this country.

In light of the risks posed by climate change I reconsidered my opposition to the nuclear industry and adopted the hope that a responsible government working hand in hand with our countries best scientists might develop technology for safely harnessing the power of the atom.

I have also invested in the company Silex Systems Limited which is developing methods for enriching uranium using laser beams at the Lucas Heights reactor in southern Sydney with the aim of creating cheaper, cleaner nuclear fuel.

My work as a campaigner brought home to me the need for companies to adhere to applicable laws and ideally the philosophies of corporate, social and environmental responsibility. As a shareholder, I feel a responsibility to research carefully my investments before I make them.

With this in mind I have twice attended annual general meetings of Silex and asked questions relating to the volume, location and isotopic content of the radioactive waste generated whilst that company has held premises at the Australian Nuclear Science and Technology complex in Southern Sydney. As a responsible investor I feel a need to know how this waste will be managed.

My personal experience calls into question the accuracy of radio active waste inventory's currently held by the federal government. It is my recollection that the management of radio active waste in Australia was so out of control at the time of the last inventory being released that a high school student found a radioactive source on a road side, took it to school and cut it open in a classroom.

My hope that things had improved in recent years was damaged in 2006 by news reports that a 62 kilogram radioactive source belonging to the company Schlumberger was lost in Western Australia. To my knowledge this radioactive source has never been retrieved and Schlumberger has denied responsibility.

This afternoon I called the offices of Silex Systems Ltd. at Lucas Heights and was told by an employee that research using lasers is still being conducted at those premises. I asked if that process created waste and was told that it did not. I asked if Silex had ever produced any radioactive waste and was told that it had not.

An appointed committee of government officials tasked with the role of making considered, informed decisions about issues relating directly to the activities of the nuclear industry need access to the most highly classified of information. I wish the members of the committee luck with this task.

James Courtney