



Medica Association for Prevention of War (Australia)

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The Medical Association for Prevention of War (Australia) works for the elimination of all weapons of mass destruction and the prevention of armed conflict. We promote peace through research, advocacy, peace education and partnerships. We are concerned about all aspects of the nuclear chain as all are linked to the threat of nuclear war. This includes uranium mining and radioactive waste disposal.

Nuclear waste is a long-lived and serious environmental hazard, and remains an unresolved problem everywhere that nuclear power or nuclear weapons are developed. Indigenous Australians have already suffered from imposition of nuclear contamination through the British nuclear bomb tests at Maralinga.

We see no case for a nuclear waste dump in remote Australia.

Medical nuclear waste We do not accept the argument that medical nuclear isotope treatment requires the development of a dump.

Most nuclear medicine waste currently in short term storage in hospitals is very short lived waste. It decays very quickly and is disposed of in standard waste disposal systems. This waste does not last long enough to require a purpose built facility.

The type of medical waste that needs an intermediate level dump is internal radiotherapy sealed sources (brachytherapy) which are rice grain like particles deposited into people's tumours to treat cancer, and then removed. These are a very small part of the waste to be deposited in the repository and certainly are not general nuclear medicine waste. They do need to be disposed of properly, but the dump is like the proverbial sledgehammer to crack a nut.

Furthermore, low level waste, the other type considered for the Australian Nuclear Waste dump, does not need a deep repository, as the Muckaty proposal will be.

MAPW believes that the nuclear medicine argument is a smokescreen. The dump will be for intermediate level waste from reprocessed fuel from the Lucas Heights reactor (the previous reactor, and probably eventually the new reactor to be developed).

MAPW believes that the safest current option for management of radioactive waste requiring disposal is continued storage at the Lucas Heights nuclear reactor. However we emphasize that all possible options for storage of the waste should be assessed, including the costs, risks and benefits of continued storage at Lucas Heights.

The radioactive waste management debate in Australia has never looked at options other than remote waste dumps on land of little economic use to non-Aboriginal Australians. The nuclear industry has never made the case that a remote location is the best place for this material. We believe that genuine consultation and scientific assessment over an adequate time period is required in the process of deciding how we should manage waste. We need to consider reducing the production of waste at its source, and equitable processes for short and long term storage and disposal. Engaging Aboriginal people in consultation requires an extended period. However radioactive waste management is not an urgent or emergent issue; rather it requires a well-considered, widely accepted and lasting solution.



Muckaty Station

Muckaty Station is 200km north of Tennant Creek, 700km north of Alice Springs, and 900km south of Darwin. We believe that the Senate Committee should take interest in the Traditional Owners and others on the front line to the proposed waste dump site. Members should travel to Tennant Creek to take evidence from people there, and visit Muckaty Station.

The nomination of the Muckaty site by the Northern Land Council was controversial and is contested by many Traditional Owners. One group of the Ngapa Traditional Owners at Muckaty was treated to a tour of Lucas Heights Nuclear Station. Since then they have been reported to have agreed to development of a nuclear waste dump on their land. However the Traditional Owners at Muckaty are not unanimous, and many Ngapa Traditional Owners oppose the dump.

The NT Labor Conference in April 2008 called on the Federal Government to exclude Muckaty for consideration as a waste dump site as the nomination "was not made with the full and informed consent of all Traditional Owners and affected people and as such does not comply with the Aboriginal Land Rights Act". This shows the extent of community concern about this site.

Aboriginal people have equal rights to services including health care and transport. They should not be offering their land and sovereignty for these services. It is particularly offensive to MAPW that the most disadvantaged of Australians, namely the First Australians, are being asked to forgo land for a nuclear waste dump.

Coercion

Section 11 of the bill explicitly overrides any state or territory laws that would hinder site selection. Section 12 then eliminates Aboriginal interests (the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Protection Act 1984) and environmental interests (the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999) from the process of choosing a site. Section 13 eliminates the property rights of any individual whose property is in the path of the dump or its access corridors.

MAPW sees a contradiction between the power of the Bill, and the Commonwealth and NT governments' stated objectives to close the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal health status. As there is now decisive evidence that control of one's life and decisions affecting one's life are crucial determinants of health and well-being (see for example Wilkinson and Marmot 2003), this legislation is anathema.

Ministerial power

The Bill places inappropriate power in the hands of the Minister to assess whether or not the dump at Muckaty or any other site should go ahead. No information is given to how this assessment will be carried out. However the bill ensures that local people have no right of appeal.

Transport of radioactive materials

We believe that nuclear waste should be moved as little as possible, and should be stored above ground close to the point of production, and close to centres of nuclear expertise and infrastructure. The development of a centralised dump facility will in no way obviate the need to secure all of the facilities now producing and storing radioactive waste across Australia. Hospitals and industrial facilities will continue to produce and store waste irrespective of the existence of a repository. This waste will need to be stored on-site, securely for years awaiting permanent disposal whether or not a purposed build nuclear dump is developed.



MAPW is concerned at the prospect of nuclear waste travelling thousands of kilometres overland to a remote waste dump. MAPW NT has written to both NT and national bodies responsible for disaster response to enquire about procedures in place in case of a transport accident involving radioactive materials. The inadequate level of preparedness for management of truck and train crashes is demonstrated repeatedly, including for example a spill of cyanide in a remote location in 2007

Conclusion

This inquiry may be an initial move towards a consultative and rational process of engaging Australian people in discussion about the issue of radioactive waste management. We all need to work together to address this issue. The current and previous radioactive waste management bills are coercive and unjust. A more appropriate process is required for such an important and long term decision.

Reference

Wilkinson R, Marmot M (2003). The social determinants of health: the solid facts. World Health Organisation, Copenhagen.

