

Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications

SUBMISSION TO THE GREEN WASHING INQUIRY

Much of the focus of allegations of green washing revolve around claims made by businesses along the lines of intentionally misrepresenting their environmental credentials, so as to gain some sort of benefit. The focus of this submission, is about another area of green washing, being concerns about facts and human rights standards in the creation of commonly accepted low or no emission products.

It is wrong that consumers embrace such technology without being made aware of the practices that are employed in their creation. This is easily acquired information that should be disclosed by retailers, so that the public are aware of what they are supporting, and that they are not saving (all of) the world.

In 2021 research by the UK's Sheffield Hallam University made the allegation global production of solar panels is significantly facilitated by the use of forced labour from China's Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang province. The BBC reported the research stating that Xinjiang produces about 45% of the world's supply of the key component, polysilicon. Polysilicon is extracted from mined quartz, and the research says the world's four biggest manufacturers use materials tainted by a massive system of coercion. The report says, "However, significant evidence - largely drawn from government and corporate sources - reveals that labour transfers are deployed in the Uyghur Region within an environment of unprecedented coercion, undergirded by the constant threat of re-education and internment."

It is fairly commonly accepted by human rights organisations, that China has detained more than a million Uyghurs in recent years, and that forced labour is being used and women are being forcibly sterilised.

Similarly, the extraction of cobalt, an element used for the production of the Lithium-Ion batteries for electric vehicles (EVs), is another area where most EVs could be perceived as something of a green washing sector. 75% of cobalt is mined in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Mr Siddharth Kara of the Harvard School of Public Health was recently reported as attributing 30% of the DRC's Cobalt production as being derived by methods including labour using slavery, child labour, forced labour, debt bondage, human trafficking, hazardous and toxic working conditions, pathetic wages, injury and death, and incalculable environmental harm. 90% of the cobalt mined goes to China for battery production. This issue was reported in the Washington Times on 14 June 2023.

The two reports I have referred to are commonly available and I know that the Committee would not ignore these realities, however I felt it important enough to raise it with you to ensure this. The odd Australian company talking up its green credentials for market share or some other benefit is certainly a concern, but I would argue that not every EV or PV product owner around Australia has visibility of their buying of products that may have had their origins in slavery, forced labour, child labour or other unethical practice, and instead has a genuine view that their actions have made the world a better place, whereas it appears from these reports that it has made the world a worse place.

It is my recommendation that manufacturers of EVs and PV systems should have to disclose that their products may have been produced, even partly using slavery, child labour, etc, or otherwise prove that they were not. I believe that when talking about Green Washing, these matters represent an area of such ethical concern, that they should be addressed by this Committee.