Submission No. 10

SUBMISSION TO HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES STANDING COMMITTEE ON INDUSTRY AND RESOURCES

DEVELOPING AUSTRALIA'S NON-FOSSIL FUEL ENERGY INDUSTRY

The remarks of the Chair of the House Industry and Resources Committee, the Hon Geoff Prosser MP are very disturbing, he said

"With higher prices now being paid for uranium on world markets, demand increasing and nations looking for ways to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, the time is right to examine the further development and export of Australia's uranium resources"

The chair it seems has already formed an opinion even before he has examined any submissions.
I urge the committee to keep an open mind on the uranium mining issue and to carefully examine all submissions before deciding what to write in their report.

MINING
REFINING
NUCLEAR POWER
NUCLEAR WEAPONS
NUCLEAR WASTE
SECURITY
CONCLUSION (Recommendations)

URANIUM MINING
There are several facts that should be considered when reviewing the option of increasing the number or size of uranium mines in Australia.

Safety: There is no known safe limit of exposure to ionising radiation.
The dose limits have been lowered at least six times over the years as more information about the effects of radiation on humans becomes better understood.
This means that workers in uranium mine are not only exposed to the normal hazards present in a mine but are also exposed to radiation from uranium.
Underground mining of uranium exposes workers to the additional danger of radon gas.
Workers at the Ranger mine in the Northern Territory were last year exposed to radioactive contamination of the water in their showers and the mine was closed while an investigation took place.
No long-term health studies of workers who have been employed in uranium mining have taken place.

Environmental Impact: Very large amounts of water are used in the mining of uranium.
The acid leaching method of mining ensures that the mine site area will remain unusable for hundreds or thousands of years due to the heavy contamination of the area.
The ground water will be heavily contaminated with radioactive material leached into it by the acid.
The tailings left over from the mining are radioactive and in the past have left surrounded by fences and danger signs. Little attention seems to have been paid to the possibility of rain and wind spreading the radioactive material over a very large area. No consideration has been given to the effect on the local wildlife and any people living in the area.

As members of the committee will be aware there have been a number of leaks and spills of radioactive material at the existing uranium mines in Australia. Several of these incidents have involved volumes of hundreds of thousands of litres. Tailings dams are often not designed to cater for abnormal weather conditions and cyclonic rain can easily cause the dams to overflow.

The mine sites will require expensive rehabilitation when the mine close, if the company is not financially able to carry out this rehabilitation will the government commit taxpayers money to doing the job.
It should be remembered that the first uranium mine in Australia at Rum Jungle in the Northern Territory has still not been rehabilitated and remains a very heavily contaminated area which is closed to the public.

The monitoring of uranium mining in Australia is carried out to a large extent by the office of the supervising scientist. The number of staff in this office is far too small to be able to successfully monitor the uranium mining operations. The office seems to have insufficient powers to monitor the day to day running of the mines. The Northern Territory government has repeatedly failed to prosecute ERA for any failures to follow the correct environmental procedures.

NUCLEAR POWER

Before the uranium ore can be used it must be refined to produce a fuel suitable to be used in nuclear power stations.
The refining of the uranium, the building of the power stations, the storage and reprocessing of the spent fuel rods and the storage of nuclear waste all use huge amounts of fossil fuels.
The case for presenting nuclear power as an alternative source of power generation that is less likely to contribute to global warming is very flawed as it does not take into account the whole nuclear power cycle.
It is not possible to insure a nuclear power station which should be an indication of what the insurance industry thinks of the safety of nuclear power.
Over the years the nuclear industry has seen unsafe plant designs, faulty plant construction, nuclear accidents, plant failures, secrecy, public misinformation, financial disasters, radioactive contamination, radiation related diseases and death.
Nuclear power has close links with nuclear weapons production and national security

NUCLEAR WEAPONS

Over 30,000 nuclear weapons exist. The plutonium in these weapons could provide fuel for nuclear power for years.
Australia should not be providing any uranium to countries that have nuclear weapons. It is a not possible for Australia to ensure that no Australian uranium is reprocessed in order to be used in nuclear weapons production.
In the production of one tonne of refined uranium seven tonnes of depleted uranium are produced. Depleted uranium is a waste product and is now being used in the production of weapons. Hundred of tonnes of depleted uranium shells have been used by NATO in the Balkan's and by the USA in Afghanistan and Iraq. Independent experts have verified the presence of high levels of radioactivity in the areas surrounding sites where depleted uranium munitions have been used. This radioactivity will be present for thousands of years.
In Iraq soaring levels of cancers and birth deformities have been recorded since the first depleted uranium munitions were used in the country.

NUCLEAR WASTE

This has become a major problem in the world as more nuclear power stations are built and more nuclear waste is produced. There is no safe way to store nuclear waste which will remain highly radioactive for thousands of years.

The decommissioning of old nuclear power stations results in the problem of what to do with thousands of tonnes of highly radioactive concrete and steel. In some parts of the USA some areas have been classified as "sacrifice zones" and are fenced off permanently from the public. This is an admission that the government of the US does not know what to do with all the radioactive waste.

Australia, by supplying uranium to other countries may well be seen as being under some obligation to accept nuclear waste for storage in Australia.

Many communities object strongly to any nuclear waste site being located near them or to having nuclear waste transported through their communities.

It should be remembered that nuclear waste may be of use to terrorists and will have to guarded for thousands of years.

SECURITY

There are signs that the USA will soon undertake the development of a new range of nuclear weapons. It is not possible to ensure that Australian uranium does not become part of a nuclear weapon.

It is obviously impossible to ensure the security of large numbers of nuclear power stations, nuclear weapons and nuclear waste.

CONCLUSION

Uranium mining should be phased out in Australia and renewable energy resources should be developed and exported instead.

The committee should consider more than the possible short-term financial gain to Australia by the sale of uranium. The committee should be considering the long-term effects of their decisions on future generations

John Schindler, [redacted]