

Economics Legislation Committee
ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON NOTICE
Industry, Innovation and Science Portfolio
2015-16 Additional Budget Estimates
11 February 2016

AGENCY: ANSTO

TOPIC: Waste Storage

REFERENCE: Question on Notice (Hansard, 11 February 2016, page 47 - 48)

QUESTION No.: AI-4

Senator LUDLAM: You do not get to write TheAdvertiser's headlines for them, so I am not asking you to take responsibility for the way in which the articles ran, but Peter Jean, political reporter, in The Advertiser on 4 February had a pretty big, attention-grabbing headline: 'Australia's nuclear reactor will stop making lifesaving medicines next year unless waste storage facilities are expanded'. That is not actually true, though, is it? It is not the case.

Dr Paterson : It is a very interesting article, but, as I have indicated, it is based on material that has been superseded.

CHAIR: It is not a very good indictment of The Advertiser, is it?

Senator LUDLAM: Like I said, it is not Dr Paterson's headline—

CHAIR: Your qualification is noted.

Senator LUDLAM: When you say 'offset risks until the early 2020s', could you flesh that out a little bit for us.

Dr Paterson : Yes. There are various forms of waste. Typically the low-level waste would be of limited regulatory concern over time, unless the volumes are such that the site itself would start to have challenges storing them. So the general approach that you take is to use a number of strategies that are well used around the world. The first one is called 'delay and decay', where you can hold very low-level waste for a period of time until the thresholds of radiation are essentially similar to the background. And in those cases they can be sent to a more standard waste repository.

The second thing that one can do is to store the waste for a period of time that allows the background to fall. And then for example with a lot of these wastes—things like gloves, gowns and goggles and so on that are used in pharmaceutical production—the 44 gallon drums can actually be compressed into what we call a puck. That is a very small drum which is a tiny fraction of the size. So the second strategy is volume reduction. Volume reduction will be applied as part of the solutions that we are intending to adopt on the site.

Senator LUDLAM: And both of those apply to low-level waste only?

Dr Paterson : They apply to the low-level waste. That is correct. The third area that one can then undertake is to make sure that all of your waste solutions you are developing on the site are enveloped by the waste acceptance criteria that are likely to be applied in the waste repository that is eventually established. That is an important principle because that means there is no requirement to reprocess the waste prior to putting it into the low-level repository. So we develop all of our solutions that we utilise on the site at ANSTO and in consultation with our peers and partners overseas in order to meet the waste acceptance criteria which we think will be conservative relative to any requirements the regulator sets in the future. Senator LUDLAM: Just for interest's sake, did any of your public affairs people contact News Corp to ask them to dial down the hysteria? I am not sure that kind of headline is particularly helpful to your cause or indeed to anybody's.

Dr Paterson : I will take that on notice. I think we would all like to avoid hysteria.

Senator LUDLAM: Indeed. These kind of headlines do not help.

Senator Sinodinos: What was the headline?

Senator LUDLAM: 'Australia's nuclear reactor will stop making lifesaving medicines next year

unless waste storage facilities are expanded.' Dr Paterson has just explained that the situation is a little bit more complex than that.

ANSWER

ANSTO did not contact News Corp regarding the headline.