

**Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications
Legislation Committee**

Answers to questions on notice

Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities portfolio

Budget Estimates, May 2011

Program: Division or Agency: 5: SSD

Question No: 137

Topic: ERA radiation specialists

Proof Hansard Page and Date 31 (25/5/11)
or Written Question:

Senator Ludlam asked:

Senator LUDLAM: ... There has obviously been quite a bit of discussion about the shortage of skilled personnel as a real constraint on plans for the expansion of the uranium sector in Australia more broadly. How would you characterise ERA's capacity in relation to accredited radiation scientists and radiation safety specialists?

Mr Hughes: This was a concern for us for some time. Stakeholders actually made the point to ERA that they were concerned about that and ERA went through a significant recruitment campaign over the past 12 months or so. They have now actually got quite a number of additional people in their radiation safety section. I believe that they have adequate capacity.

Senator LUDLAM: They do now?

Mr Hughes: Yes.

Senator LUDLAM: Can you tell us how many radiation specialists are engaged by ERA at the moment?

Mr Hughes: I cannot give you the exact number.

Senator LUDLAM: Is that something you could take on notice for us?

Mr Hughes: I will take that on notice, yes.

Answer:

There are 11 radiation safety professionals within ERA's Radiation and Hygiene team on site at Ranger. Within the company, there is an additional role of Chief Advisor Radiation Governance and Product Stewardship, which is currently filled by an employee with significant mining radiation safety experience.

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Question No: 138

Topic: Alligator Rivers Region
Committees

Proof Hansard Page and Date 34 and 35 (25/5/11)
or Written Question:

Senator Cameron asked:

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CHAIR: Can I now come to the Alligator Rivers Region Advisory Committee?

...

CHAIR: Could you give me some figures on the attendance at the meetings over the last five years, in terms of the numbers of apologies? That should be a pretty simple calculation.

Mr Hughes: We could provide that on notice, I think. I would not be able to tell you that at the moment.

CHAIR: Of course, yes.

Mr Hughes: I would just make a comment, if I may, about that. Although there are a number of members who give their apologies, they also have deputies turn up for some areas. Also, we have quite a number of people who attend as observers. So there are often a lot of people at those Alligator Rivers Region Advisory Committee meetings.

CHAIR: That is good. I am not really worried about or interested in observers; they have no status on the committee other than to observe. I am interested in the actual operation of the committee to make sure that it is operating effectively and consistent with the obligations that the committee has.

...

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CHAIR: Does your committee have a look at the CSIRO and the Climate Commission scientific work that is being done in the Northern Territory?

Mr Hughes: Do you mean in terms of climate change?

CHAIR: In terms of climate change.

Mr Hughes: It is on the agenda and recognised by the Alligator Rivers Region Technical Committee as an issue and it is put up constantly at meetings that this needs to be contemplated when we are looking at our research needs in the area and also for regulatory purposes. So, yes, it is on the agenda.

CHAIR: When was it first discussed at the technical committee? You can take that on notice, if you like.

Mr Hughes: I would have to take it on notice to search it out. But I do recall it was more than three or four years ago.

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Answer:

Alligator Rivers Region Advisory Committee - attendance

The Alligator Rivers Region Advisory Committee currently comprises an independent Chairperson, 15 members and 14 deputy members representing relevant stakeholder organisations. Where members are unable to attend, relevant stakeholder organisations are normally represented by their appointed deputy members. Deputy members are sometimes listed as apologies, even when the member is present so a more appropriate measure of the operation of the committee is the number of memberships represented at each meeting from the total of 16 including the independent chairperson. Both statistics, i.e. apologies and memberships represented, are provided for this reason.

Meeting number	Date	Total apologies tendered	Total memberships represented
35	28 March 2011	6	16
34	25 August 2010	9	11
33	21 April 2010	7	13
32	27 August 2009	5	13
31	7 April 2009	3	16
30	7 August 2008	10	14
29	18 March 2008	12	12
28	21 August 2007	10	12
27	12 April 2007	8	14

Alligator Rivers Region Technical Committee - climate change

Climate change was first discussed by the Alligator Rivers Region Technical Committee at its second meeting held in Darwin on 7 December 1995 as part of the Committee's review of research undertaken by the Environmental Research Institute of the Supervising Scientist on behalf of the then Commonwealth Department of Environment, Sport and Territories to assess the vulnerability of wetlands in Kakadu to climate change.

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Program: Division or Agency: 5: SSD

Question No: 139

Topic: Services provided to
DSEWPaC

Proof Hansard Page and Date 37 and 38 (25/5/11)
or Written Question:

Senator Ludlam asked:

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Senator LUDLAM: I want to skip quickly to WA and the ‘services’, if I could describe them as that, that you are providing to some of the proponents in Western Australia. You indicated in some answers that you took on notice—and thank you for responding—that you have provided technical advice on Kintyre, Yeelirrie and some of the projects that are proposed at Wiluna. Can you provide us—and I know that we are a bit short of time—with technical advice on what issues and any detail at all of exactly what it was that you have provided for those proponents, whether it was direct to the proponents or to the WA state government?

Mr Hughes: It is not provided direct to the proponents; it is provided to the approvals and wildlife division of our own department.

Senator LUDLAM: Could I ask you to take on notice, given that time is fairly short, providing us with some detail on the precise nature of the services that you are providing to the department?

Mr Hughes: We can take that on notice.

...

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Senator LUDLAM: I would also ask you to provide on notice the dates that information was submitted to the Commonwealth department.

Answer:

The Supervising Scientist Division has provided the following formal advice to the Approvals and Wildlife Division within the Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities:

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Project	Advice/document	Date
Yeelirrie	Comment on environmental scoping document (guidelines for Environmental Review and Management Program)	21/08/2009 & 18/02/2010
Wiluna	Comment on adequacy of draft Environmental Review and Management Program	01/04/2011
Kintyre	Comment on environmental scoping document (guidelines for Environmental Review and Management Program)	18/02/2011

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Question No: 140

Topic: Disposal of tailings - 10,000-year responsibility

Proof Hansard Page and Date 38 (25/5/11)
or Written Question:

Senator Ludlam asked:

Senator LUDLAM: ...My last question—because I know that we are out of time—is whether or not you have provided any advice at all of any kind on the matter of ERA's 10,000-year responsibility for the disposal of tailings. As far as I am aware, that is a unique licence condition anywhere in the world. The tailings will obviously be toxic for much longer than that, but it is a good start—a 10,000-year responsibility. There is a motion before the WA parliament on extending that licence condition to any new uranium mines—if it is good enough for the territory then it should apply elsewhere. At any time have you been asked for advice or have you offered advice on how on earth that is to be achieved?

Mr Hughes: I personally have not. I do not know what input the Supervising Scientist at the time that that was developed had. That probably would have been Bob Fry back in the 1980s, I would imagine.

Senator LUDLAM: My specific question was whether the state government or at any time any other Commonwealth minister or department has asked you for advice on the 10,000-year licence condition?

Mr Hughes: Not that I can specifically recall. We do undertake assessment works of any proposals in the dealing with tailings on the mine sites.

Senator LUDLAM: I understand that. I am asking specifically about the 10,000-year responsibility. I think it is an important precedent that we set, and obviously we are determined to make sure that it is applied to other projects. Could you undertake to go through your records and provide us with a precis on that issue specifically, where it came from? If you could confirm for us on the record whether it is accurate that you have not since then submitted or provided advice.

Mr Hughes: I will have a look. I will take that question on notice and see what we can do about that.

Answer:

Section 11.3 of the Environmental Requirements of the Commonwealth of Australia for the operation of the Ranger Uranium Mine attached to the Authority issued under s41 of the *Atomic Energy Act 1953* requires *inter alia* that the final disposal of tailings at the mine site must be undertaken to the satisfaction of the Minister with the advice of the Supervising Scientist on the basis of best available modelling in such a way as to ensure that the tailings are physically isolated from the environment for at least 10,000 years and that any contaminants arising from the tailings will not result in any detrimental environmental impacts for at least 10,000 years.

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The specific 10,000 year period requirement was first introduced when the Ranger Commonwealth Environmental Requirements were revised as a component of the renewal of the *Atomic Energy Act* section 41 Authority, which came into effect in January 2000. The previous version of the Environmental Requirements had no such specification.

In June 2010, the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade sought advice from the Supervising Scientist on the required period for isolation of tailings at Ranger for input into its Inquiry into Australia's Relationship with the Countries of Africa. The Supervising Scientist provided the requested advice but has not otherwise provided further advice.