

Senate Standing Committee on Economics

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

Resources, Energy and Tourism Portfolio

Budget Senate Estimates

2 June 2009

Question: BR-6

Topic: Radioactive waste management strategy

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Senator Abetz asked:

Senator ABETZ—It is a policy issue, so I will direct it to the parliamentary secretary at the table. Is it the government's view and policy position that it would be ideal if all the waste of the nation, from both the Commonwealth and the states and territories, were placed in a central repository?

Senator McLucas—Once again, I will seek some advice from Minister Ferguson.

Senator ABETZ—If that is the government's policy position—which I would have thought, on the face of it, at least, makes sense—have any discussions have been had at COAG, a relevant ministerial meeting or a leaders' meeting to progress this so that we can have a national strategy as opposed to potentially eight or nine different strategies around Australia?

Senator McLucas—I will take that on notice.

Senator ABETZ—How many people are working on this strategy in the department?

Mr Davoren—I have a staff of three officers.

Senator ABETZ—How long have they been working on this strategy?

Mr Davoren—We provide advice to government on this issue quite regularly. We provided advice to the government on the work done by the previous government and on the site assessment studies that were commissioned by the previous government, and we are awaiting advice from the government on how it wishes to proceed.

Senator ABETZ—This might be a bit of a cheeky question and discipline me if it is. You have provided the advice, so what are you and the three staff doing whilst you are waiting on a government response? Are you freewheeling?

Mr Davoren—This is not the only issue we have responsibility for, Senator. We have responsibility for managing the former atomic nuclear test sites at Maralinga in South Australia, where the Commonwealth is still responsible for about 3,000 kilometres of land and the infrastructure out there. We also have responsibility for a program of monitoring and maintenance works at Rum Jungle, which was recently funded in the budget.

Senator ABETZ—But at this stage there is no further development on the repository; the ball is fair and square in the minister's court?

Mr Davoren—That is correct.

Senator ABETZ—In that case, Parliamentary Secretary, given that the department has finished its work on this matter, could the minister then provide us with a timeline as to when a decision is made? If the department has finished with its considerations, it would be very interesting to know when the minister will make his determination on it. More likely, is it stuck in the Prime Minister's office for consideration and the tick-off? When it is likely to re-emerge from the government, either via the minister's office or the Prime Minister's office, because it now seems that all the preliminary work has been done and the only stalling is on the part of the government?

Senator McLucas—In good faith I have taken those questions on notice, and I note that you have made your political point. We probably could move on to other questions.

Senator ABETZ—Not a political point—an observation. But if you are saying to us that this matter will not go to the Prime Minister's office prior to the ministerial tick-off by Mr Ferguson, I will ask that question. Can the minister advise whether the proposal will go to the Prime Minister's office for consideration prior to final approval and decision and also whether this matter will go to cabinet—

Senator McLucas—I expect so. I will find out for you.

Senator ABETZ—before a final decision is made?

Senator McLucas—I imagine it will go to cabinet.

Answer:

The Minister is currently working on a comprehensive, national approach to radioactive waste management. The Minister will make details of this approach available when it is completed and agreed within the Government.