

EDUCATION, SCIENCE AND TRAINING

SENATE LEGISLATION COMMITTEE - QUESTIONS ON NOTICE 2005-2006 SUPPLEMENTARY ESTIMATES HEARING

Outcome: 3

Output Group: 3.2 – Assistance for science collaboration and innovation

DEST Question No. E815_06 - Final

Senator Nash asked on 2 November 2005, EWRE Hansard page 49.

Question:

Finally, in view of those questions and your answers, would you see the information contained in this brochure as misleading and incorrect?

Answer:

Misleading and incorrect content within the NT Government "Dump" brochure.

Yes. The brochure *What YOU Need To Know About Canberra's Proposed Nuclear Dump* contains a number of misleading statements and inaccuracies.

The claim that "spent fuel rods returned from France and Scotland" would be housed at the Facility is incorrect. The purpose of sending the spent fuel for processing overseas is to convert it to a stable cement or vitreous waste form suitable for long term storage in Australia. It will be cemented or vitrified intermediate level waste that that is returned to Australia, not spent fuel.

The statement that "Any nuclear waste needs to be handled with extreme caution" is incorrect. In fact, the stringency of handling procedures depends on the level of radioactivity of the waste. Very low level waste can be handled with simple protective measures, whereas more active wastes require shielding and detailed operating procedures to protect workers from radiation.

The claims that 'a range of terminal and debilitating medical conditions have been directly linked to nuclear waste' and "nuclear waste poses a serious danger to humans and the environment for many thousands of years" are misleading with regard to the Commonwealth Radioactive Waste Management Facility. 90% of the wastes to be managed at the Facility will be low level radioactive wastes for which these statements are incorrect. Potentially dangerous Intermediate level wastes will be packaged and managed so that they do not present a hazard to humans or the environment.

Reference to 'military ordinance (sic)' being housed at the Facility is misleading. Military ordinance implies that munitions or weapons will be stored at the Facility. This is not correct. The radioactive wastes held by the Department of Defence include such items as luminous paint, dials and compasses and industrial radioactive sources.

The brochure confuses previous siting processes for radioactive waste management facilities with siting the Commonwealth Radioactive Waste Management Facility. It is not accurate to say that "over a ten year period a Commonwealth Government committee looked at potential sites across Australia and offshore islands. The "ten

year period” presumably is a reference to the systematic siting process for the National Low Level Radioactive Waste Repository commenced in 1992 by the then Minister for Primary Industries and Energy, the Hon Simon Crean MP. This process ended in 2004 following legal action by the South Australian Government. Detailed consideration of island territories were considered in 2004 and 2005 in the examination of possible sites for the Commonwealth Radioactive Waste Management Facility.

The Billa Kalina (Woomera) region was indentified as the preferred region for a national repository for low and short-lived intermediate level radioactive waste in 1998. Two broad regions (Bloods Range and Tanami) and many smaller areas likely to contain suitable repository sites were identified in the Northern Territory.

The statement “A further seven sites were identified as being most suitable for the location of a nuclear dump” is presumably a reference to former process by the National Store Advisory Committee (NSAC) to identify a site for Commonwealth intermediate level radioactive waste. This process became irrelevant on 14 July 2004 when the Prime Minister announced that the Australian Government would establish a facility at which low level and intermediate level radioactive waste management facilities would be co-located. It is misleading to suggest that the NSAC study is relevant to the process for identifying a site for the co-located facility.