

# JustComment

www.erc.org.au

A joint publication of Edmund Rice Centre for Justice and Community Education &  
The School of Education, Australian Catholic University

## Poisoning the heart of our home – dumping the world's nuclear waste

### Our planet is deeply burdened

as it harbours 390,000 tons of high level nuclear waste produced by nuclear reactors and weapons programs over the past 70 years. Spent nuclear fuel, one of the most dangerous materials on earth, is stored underwater in numerous cooling ponds throughout the world. Nuclear waste is dangerous to all life for unthinkable periods of time. Plutonium has a toxic lifespan of 240,000 years. A further 10,000 tons of spent fuel is added annually to the world's accumulated stores of deadly waste. Spent fuel from nuclear reactors, vast amounts of lower-level radioactive waste lie is also scattered in mining sites, tailings dams, undersea dumps and soil-borne contamination on every continent. **We have no idea what to do with the stuff.**<sup>1</sup>

The recently released **Nuclear Fuel Cycle Royal Commission Report** (NFCRC Report) has recommended that the South Australian government accept over one third of the world's high level waste above-ground and then the eventual burial in yet-to-be-built underground repositories in the desert. In November 2015 the Australian government also released a short-list of six sites for a proposed national radioactive waste facility.<sup>2</sup>

This is the **government's third attempt** to impose a dump on Aboriginal land despite clear opposition from traditional owners. It says that no group will have a right of veto, which is coded racism. The dump may go ahead despite acknowledging that **'almost all Indigenous community members surveyed are strongly opposed to the site continuing.'**<sup>3</sup>

Though welcomed by some especially for the economic benefits, **communities are concerned** that they are seen as a dumping ground for a 'dirty' nuclear industry whose waste remain radioactive for a minimum 100,000 years.

Three properties proposed are in South Australia. Three other proposed sites are in New South Wales, the Northern Territory and Queensland. **The Government insists that it will be a low-level waste facility.** It is not.<sup>4</sup>

Some owners have been **misinformed** that 'It's basically only a medical waste facility'. In a great understatement, a minister for resources and energy has said: 'Low level waste is those gloves or those goggles or the paper or the plastic that comes into contact with nuclear medicine, and intermediate waste could be, for example, those steel rods that are used in the reactor to actually create these particular products.' The minister said that the facility would 'only' house low and intermediate level waste, but he seems unaware of the toxicity of this long-lived intermediate level radioactive waste (LLILLW). In truth, the Australian government is seeking a site to host the world's high-level nuclear waste<sup>5</sup>. This has been spruiked as a fail-safe commercial venture that will relieve the South Australian Government of its financial problems and provide a cosy economic future for generations. **This madness blithely ignores the fact that the genetic and biological futures of those generations may thereafter be a different story.**



The renewed prospect of South Australia hosting radioactive waste sites arouses, for local Aboriginal populations, collective memories of both the British atomic tests of the 1950s and 1960s, and the successful 1998–2004 campaign to block a dump. One Coober Pedy man wrote, **'We live off the land... We go bush, we gather our food out there. We don't want radioactive waste to destroy our land. It's going to contaminate everything — our creeks, our water, our family.'**<sup>6</sup>

Aboriginal people have many stories of the serious repercussions of the traumatic experience of these nuclear tests which became the impetus behind the campaigning between 1998 to 2004 against the radioactive dump proposed for the northern South Australian bush<sup>7</sup>. Indigenous people and environmentalists worked together to protect country, ground-waters, through

huge grassroots campaigns, media support. 86% of South Australians opposed the national proposal and finally plans were abandoned. At the time the people were assured that SA would never again be targeted as the site for the dump.

In 2015, activists involved in the 1998 to 2004 campaign were outraged when a royal commission was announced to *consider the feasibility and viability as well as the risks and opportunities associated* with four areas of the nuclear fuel cycle, including storage of radioactive waste, and that South Australia would welcome the world's high-level radioactive waste.

The world's only functional depository for high-level radioactive waste (New Mexico, USA) was closed in 2010. \$13 billion was spent on its construction at Yucca Mountain in Nevada. It was closed without taking in a single gram of nuclear waste. The nuclear industry is seeking new possibilities as it faces falling prices and increased post-Fukushima concerns about the dangers of the nuclear industry<sup>8</sup>.

Though a justice issue for those affected, all are affected because of the possibility of sea and land transport accidents where the fallout will not stop at state boundaries.

Pope Francis<sup>9</sup> illuminates the current struggle for the environment in Australia: **'Today... we have to realise that a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor.'** Everything is connected!

Pope Francis has said *'Our goal [is] to become painfully aware, to dare to turn what is happening to our world into our own personal suffering and thus to discover what each of us can do about*

*it.'* A long-time campaigner against the uranium industry, Arabunna Elder Kevin Buzzacott, puts it this way: *'If we look after this old country, the country will look after us ... How could I cut off my knee or part of my knee? I won't work without parts of me. Same for country. I can't sleep for worrying about the country. I want the word to get out.'*<sup>10</sup>

The recent **Nuclear Fuel Cycle Royal Commission Report** has so confidently promoted South Australia as the ideal destination for more than a third of the world's stores of spent nuclear fuel, thus enticing support by the whiff of billions of dollars of new revenue. It calls for the transportation of vast amounts of highly radioactive materials from around the world to be in decades-long storage in above-ground facilities, and then proposes the construction of a deep underground repository for the 'permanent' burial of these wastes<sup>11</sup>.

The idea to bury the world's nuclear poison in the heart of the Australia is not new. It has festered insidiously for two decades. It first stirred in the late 1990s when the UK based company, Pangea Resources, promoted the construction of a commercially-operated international waste repository in Western Australia. This project was halted in 1999 when Friends of the Earth (UK) discovered a promotional video produced by Pangea Resources and sent it to Friends of the Earth (Australia) to make Australians aware that they were targeted as a nuclear dump for the world. In 2005, former prime minister, Bob Hawke excitedly proclaimed: *'Forget about current account deficits... we could revolutionise the economics of Australia if we did this.'*<sup>12</sup> In 2002, Pangea Resources, rebranded as ARIUS (the Association for Regional and International Underground Storage). It is still scheming to build an international high-level nuclear waste dump.

The situation is no different today as both government and opposition leaders are in accord regarding the desirability of importing the world's high level nuclear waste into South Australia. **They have not listened to the voices of indigenous traditional owners** or to more informed advocates of restraint and sanity<sup>13</sup>.

The earth is heaving under the detritus, violence, and the unquenchable excesses of a terminally destructive civilisation that is blind to the consequences of its actions. The projections of the NFCRC report assume continuing social, political, economic, climatic and existential stability for the next 120 years –the nominated life-span of the project – and continuing geological stability for tens of thousands of years thereafter.

The challenge for us is to channel our collective energies into creating conditions that will end the excess and wastefulness that would lead us to peril, yet many are lured into more of the same, business-as-usual enticements that ignore the realities we face and those that await our children and generations to come.

Australia's nuclear industry has a **shameful history of 'radioactive racism'** dating back to the 1950s British bomb tests. These attitudes persist as plans to dump over half a million tonnes of nuclear waste on Aboriginal land and open new uranium mines. But **now Aboriginal peoples and traditional land owners are fighting back!**

*'We don't want a nuclear waste dump here on our country and worry that if the waste comes here it will harm our environment and muda (our lore, our creation, our everything). We call on the federal government to withdraw the nomination of the site and to show more respect in future.'*<sup>14</sup>

Full set of resources and references are on the ERC website **www.erc.org.au**



**Edmund Rice Centre**  
AWARENESS • ADVOCACY • ACTION

LPO Box 2219 (15 Henley Road)  
Homebush West  
(near Flemington Railway Station)  
**Phone (02) 8762 4200**  
**Fax (02) 8762 4220**  
**Email [erc@erc.org.au](mailto:erc@erc.org.au)**  
**Web [www.erc.org.au](http://www.erc.org.au)**

 **ACU National**  
Australian Catholic University  
Brisbane Sydney Canberra Ballarat Melbourne

179 Albert Rd, Strathfield 2135  
**Phone (02) 9739 2100**  
**Fax (02) 02 9739 2105**

*This material is the sole property of the Edmund Rice Centre for Justice and Community Education and the Institute for Advancing Community Engagement. Reproduction is not permitted without the permission of these organisations.*