

Divisive campaign on South Australian facility highlights urgent need for long term nuclear waste management plan

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Introduction by Croakey:

Federal Minister for Resources, Water and Northern Australia Keith Pitt this week [thanked](#) the people of Kimba for their time this week to discuss the National Radioactive Waste Management Facility, for which the recent Federal Budget allocates \$100 million.

The facility, Pitt said, would consolidate our radioactive waste accumulated over about 70 years, currently spread across more than 100 locations across Australia, “into a one, safe, and purpose-built facility”. His statement said:

“It was important to speak with people both for and against the facility, and my experience reflects what has been demonstrated in local surveys over the years and that is while some people are concerned, most have a strong desire for this project to be delivered.”

But many people have grave concerns about the facility, its location and its very existence, including the Traditional Owners of the area, the Barngarla people, writes Tilman Ruff, Associate Professor at the Nossal Institute for Global Health at Melbourne University.

Ruff says a deeply flawed consultation process has led to this decision, amid the lack of a comprehensive long-term management plan for Australia’s radioactive waste.

Tilman Ruff writes:

Radioactive waste production and management need a sound evidence-based plan, not shoddy and racist imposition based on misguided nuclear ambition.

On Tuesday 6 October, under the cover of the Federal Budget, the Government planned to introduce controversial amendments to laws on radioactive waste management in the Senate.

The amendments were dropped from the Senate list the following day, only to reappear the following day, the last sitting day for this parliamentary session. They were ultimately not tabled, for reasons unstated, but most likely because the government was concerned it did not have the numbers to pass them.

The [National Radioactive Waste Management Amendment \(Site Specification, Community Fund and Other Measures\) Bill 2020](#) seeks to confirm the siting of a national radioactive waste facility near Kimba in regional South Australia. It would also remove any legal right to review this decision.

These laws were opposed by Labor, minor party and independent members when they passed in the lower house in June, and remain actively contested in Parliament and [more so](#) in the community.

Nonetheless \$103.6 million was allocated in the budget over the next four years for the [planned radioactive waste dump at Kimba](#), a clear sign the government remains committed to this flawed legislation, which is again scheduled to be debated in the Senate [next week](#).

The radioactive waste management plans it would lock in deserve greater public scrutiny than they have received to date.

No long term management plan for nuclear waste

Australia needs to develop a plan for long-term management and disposal of long-lived intermediate level nuclear waste, which must be kept strictly isolated from people and the environment for 10,000 years.

More than 90 percent of Australia's radioactive waste comes from nuclear reactors managed by the Australian Nuclear Science and Technology Organisation (ANSTO) at Lucas Heights in southern Sydney. This waste is stored there in a dedicated Interim Waste Store facility at Australia's principal nuclear facility, with the best expertise and capacity in the country to manage this safely, monitored 24/7 by the Australia Federal Police.

A serious, open, transparent, evidence-based process is required to carefully consider the options, and develop the most responsible plan for ongoing long-term management and disposal of this waste.

Instead, successive governments — both Coalition and Labor — have sought to impose a succession of ill-considered waste dump plans on SA and NT remote communities. All have previously failed because of deeply flawed processes and strong community opposition.

Transport, taxpayer burdens absent health need

The risks of accident or theft are greatest during transport of nuclear materials. Kimba is 1,700 km from Lucas Heights. Road or sea transport of radioactive waste would involve lengthy routes potentially traversing many communities in multiple states.

The nuclear regulator, the Australian Radiation Protection and Nuclear Safety Agency (ARPANSA) has recently confirmed to a Senate inquiry that Lucas Heights has the capacity to safely store Australia's radioactive waste for several decades, and that there is no urgent need to relocate it.

The Senate Inquiry last month recommended the South Australian plan [go ahead](#), but there was a split among the committee membership, with Senators Jenny McAllister (Labor), Sarah Hanson-Young (Greens) and Rex Patrick (Independent) dissenting.

The government's repeated claim that an immediate interim radioactive waste dump is needed to ensure the continuation of nuclear medicine in Australia is false.

Every sizeable hospital currently manages their radioactive waste on a 'delay and decay' basis on site; the residual waste rapidly loses its radioactivity and is stored on-site until it has decayed and can be discarded with normal waste. This doesn't need to and won't change.

The emotive but fallacious claim that provision of nuclear medicine services needed for diagnosis and treatment of cancer will be jeopardised if a new nuclear waste dump is not urgently progressed is being dishonestly but persistently [promoted](#).

To support passage of the government's amendments, Federal Resources, Water and Northern Australia Minister Keith Pitt is believed to be planning a "nuclear medicine roundtable" at Parliament House on Monday 9 November.

The true driver of increasing need for waste management is ANSTO's institutional nuclear ambitions, reflected in its current massive ramp-up of production of medical isotopes for export — from around one percent to a target of 25-30 percent of global supply over the next several years.

Not only are we left with the waste legacy of this expanding isotope export business, Australian taxpayers also pick up the bill, paying \$400 million for the Lucas Heights OPAL reactor, and subsidising ANSTO on an annual basis for its nuclear operations.

ANSTO received \$313.8 million in 2019-20, and was given an additional \$238.1 million over 4 years in last month's Budget.

Cost analyses in several other countries have found that medical isotope sales usually only recover 10-15 percent of the true cost of production once waste, decommissioning, insurance and other costs are factored in.

ANSTO's export expansion push is increasing domestic nuclear waste pressures, and this is happening without proper public and parliamentary accountability and scrutiny.

Divisive, undemocratic and racist processes

The government campaign to persuade the residents of Kimba to accept a radioactive waste dump has been misleading and divisive, with much inaccurate information about risks and benefits, inflated employment promises, and very poor process to assess genuine community views.

The people selected to vote on this proposal (with shifting and nebulous goalposts) were town-based, excluding many farmers who actually live closer to the site than those in Kimba township. The local community has become divided.

Crucially, despite multiple requests, Barnjarla Native Title holders were explicitly excluded from the government's community ballot, and remain actively opposed to the planned waste facility. The Barnjarla people [unsuccessfully attempted](#) to have their exclusion from the consultation process struck down in the Federal Court in March on the grounds that it contravened the Racial Discrimination Act.

When the Barnjarla people commissioned a survey themselves, 100 percent of those surveyed were opposed. Nonetheless the process has proceeded, despite government promises that Aboriginal views would be taken into account.

Minister Pitt visited Kimba for the first time in months on 3 November. His [media release](#) thanking the Kimba community and chronicling his meetings with the mayor, proposed waste site landowner and various local organisations mentions Barnjarla people not once.



2018 No Nukes Dump rally, Port Augusta. Photo: TJ Sutton

Removing the right to legal review

The clear and unacceptable rationale of the proposed amendments are to remove the right of legal challenge to the choice of a national radioactive waste facility near Kimba.

Minister Pitt already has the power under the existing *National Radioactive Waste Management Act (2012)* to advance the planned Kimba facility, however this would be subject to legal review.

The right to independent legal recourse is a fundamental principle of our democracy and should not be jettisoned without compelling reasons – especially on an issue with such significant long-term implications and impacts as radioactive waste.

To remove the right to judicial review for affected people is unfair, unnecessary and unjustified. It violates the rights of Aboriginal people.

Out of sight, out of mind

The government's approach, codified in the proposed amendments, would see long-lived radioactive intermediate level nuclear waste transported long distances from the best and most secure site to manage radioactive waste in Australia, to a distant site in South Australian farming country with no current expertise, facilities or experience in securely managing long-lived hazardous radioactive waste.

Effectively, this "temporary" storage facility for waste that must be kept safe from the environment for over 10,000 years will be a large shed.

There is currently no plan and no process to develop a plan for the long-term management and eventual disposal of this waste. Therefore the intermediate level waste will likely languish indefinitely above ground in a facility inadequate for safe long-term storage or disposal, but out of sight and out of mind from Canberra or Sydney.

Australia needs an open, transparent, evidence-based and independent review of Australia's current and projected radioactive waste production. This review should examine and make recommendations on the best practice long-term management of Australia's radioactive waste production and disposal.

It should be conducted independently of ANSTO, given their role as proponent of the current proposal and plans to significantly increase nuclear waste production over the next decade for reasons which are not based on the health or other needs of Australians.

It should be open to input from Indigenous organisations, civil society organisations, experts and the public, and be undertaken before any soil is turned for a dump in Kimba and before any waste is moved from Lucas Heights. We have ample time to do this properly.

Tilman Ruff AO is Associate Professor at the Nossal Institute for Global Health, University of Melbourne. He is Co-President of International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War, and co-founder and founding chair of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, both Nobel Peace Prize laureate organisations.