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The Committee Manager
Joint Select Committee on the Transportation and Storage of Nuclear Waste
Parliament House
Macquarie St
SYDNEY NSW 2000

To Whom It May Concern

Please find enclosed a brief submission of the Inquiry into the Transportation and Storage of Nuclear Waste.

Yours sincerely

KERRY BARTLETT MP

SUBMISSION INTO NSW PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY INTO THE TRANSPORTATION AND STORAGE OF NUCLEAR WASTE

BACKGROUND

The undoubted benefits Australians receive from the use of radioactive materials in medicine, research and industry bring with them the challenges of storage and transportation of the associated waste.

The principal medical use of radioactive isotopes is for diagnosis and cancer treatment. According to ANSTO's estimates, in 2000-01 around 525,000 people in Australia received nuclear medicine treatments for medical conditions such as cancer.

Despite some claims that alternatives such as accelerators or cyclotrons could replace radioisotope production by research reactors, the neutron-rich isotopes produced in reactors are required for cancer therapy procedures. Around 70% of all nuclear medicine usage in Australia requires technetium-99m, leading the 2001 Senate Select Inquiry into the Contract for a New Reactor at Lucas Heights to conclude that –

“In summary, the committee accepts that, at the moment, nuclear reactors will continue to be the only feasible source of neutrons for the manufacture of technetium-99m and that it is unlikely that anything will compete with the reactor produced molybdenum-technetium generator in the near future.”

RADIOACTIVE WASTE

1. Existing Material

According to the “National Radioactive Waste Repository” Draft EIS, Australia has accumulated around 3,700m³ of low level and short-lived intermediate level waste.

2. Future Generation

It is anticipated that the generation of further waste will be relatively small, estimated to be around 40m³ a year of routine low and intermediate level waste.

Additional to this will be the waste resulting from the decommissioning of the current Lucas Heights reactor.

STORAGE

Currently, Australia's waste is stored at over 100 locations around Australia, very little of it in facilities suitable for long-term storage.

The construction of a secure purpose-built national repository in a remote and geologically stable area with minimal environmental risk is a necessary and responsible approach. In fact, as far back as 1985, a combined state-federal committee called for an investigation to find a suitable site producing a short list of 8 sites in the early 1990s. In 1992, the then Federal Minister for Primary Industries and Energy, the Hon Simon Crean reiterated the Commonwealth's commitment to establishing a national repository, endorsed by state and territory governments in the "National Strategy for Ecologically Sustainable Development, December 1992" (Objective 19.2) -

"Governments will: undertake a siting study to identify a short list of suitable sites for a repository for low level and short-lived intermediate level radioactive waste."

On 18 July 1994 the Minister for Primary Industries and Energy, the Hon Bob Collins, released for public comment the Discussion Paper *A Radioactive Waste Repository for Australia: Site Selection Study – Phase 2*, "..... to identify eight broad regions in Australia most likely to contain suitable repository sites."

The 1999 Joint Statutory Public Works Committee unanimously recommended that a new research reactor be built at Lucas Heights and further recommended that -

"Removal of all radioactive waste from Lucas Heights for disposal or storage at a National Repository must be a high priority and is dependent on the timely provision of the Repository and Store (rec 4.I45)."

TRANSPORTATION

The consideration of transport modes and routes to the chosen repository site must first and foremost consider safety aspects.

According to the Draft EIS prepared for DEST, Australia's safety record in the routine transport of radioactive materials over the past 40 years is such that there has been no accident involving a significant radiological release of harm to health or the environment. All necessary means must be adopted to ensure this continues with the transportation of waste.

Packaging, handling and transport arrangements must meet the highest Australian and international standards. It is imperative that packaging is such that even in the unlikely event of a major accident, there is no chance of spillage or dispersal at the accident site.

The Draft EIS concludes that, considering handling transport accident probability and the extent of any possible accident damage, road transport is the preferable option. Further, it estimated that after the backlog is shipped, future waste transportation will be limited to five 6m shipping container loads a year nationally. However, it is important that, particularly for the removal of existing backlogs of waste, alternatives to road transport be fully explored. When road transport is used, routes should be chosen to minimise movement through populated areas such as Western Sydney and the Blue Mountains.

While the packaging and transportation arrangements will meet the highest standards and are designed to prevent any dispersal or leakage of radioactive material in the event of an accident, there are some local community concerns about the possible transportation through the Blue Mountains.

Amongst these concerns is a resolution by Blue Mountains City Council on 28 January 2003 stating its –

“..... strong opposition to nuclear waste being transported through the Blue Mountains”
and reaffirming its “commitment to this local government area being a nuclear free zone.”

In considering the various transport options, it is imperative that the concerns of local residents and local government bodies are addressed in relation to the relevant safety considerations.

CONCLUSION

Most Australians recognise the benefits of nuclear medicine and other uses of radioisotopes. However, many do have questions about the storage and transportation of waste, although most concerns arise from inadequate information. It is essential that during the decision-making process, communities which may potentially be on transport routes are fully consulted.

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