

Government seeks public comment on environmental assessment of waste repository

An important public consultation process has begun as the next step in plans to establish the national low and short-lived intermediate level radioactive waste repository.

The Federal Minister for Environment and Heritage, Senator Hill, has issued draft guidelines for an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) into the project.

The EIS will be prepared by the Department of Industry, Science and Resources (ISR) to ensure that:

- the potential impacts of the repository on the environment are fully examined; and
- measures to minimise potential impacts are proposed.

Public input is a key element of the EIS process.

As part of the EIS process, the community is invited to comment on the project; the proposed site at Evetts Field West in the Woomera

Prohibited Area; and two alternative sites to the east of the Roxby Downs/Woomera Road.

The first opportunity for public comment has now arisen with the release of draft EIS guidelines, by Senator Hill on 6 April 2001.

People wishing to comment on the guidelines can do so by writing to Environment Australia until 23 May 2001.

Senator Hill will consider all comments received, modify the guidelines as necessary and then release the final guidelines for the EIS.

ISR must follow these in preparing the EIS for public comment.

ISR will prepare a Draft EIS by early next year.

The community will have the opportunity to comment on the Draft EIS and to:

- assess whether it responds to the issues identified in the guidelines; and
- raise other issues regarding the repository proposal.

Once comments have been received, ISR will prepare a

final EIS, taking all comments into consideration. Before deciding whether the project can proceed, Senator Hill will make his own assessment

as to whether the Final EIS complies with the guidelines and adequately responds to issues raised by the community.



Members of the Regional Consultative Committee inspect progress during soil sampling at Evetts Field West.

Overseeing the EIS process

The EIS for the National Radioactive Waste Repository must show that the facility can be safely established before it will be approved.

The EIS process is administered under the Federal Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999, which defines the environment as including three principal elements:

- (a) ecosystems and their constituent parts – including people and communities;
- (b) natural and physical resources; and
- (c) qualities and characteristics of locations, places and areas.

The social, economic and cultural aspects of these three elements also are considered to be part of the environment.

More information on the Environment Protection and

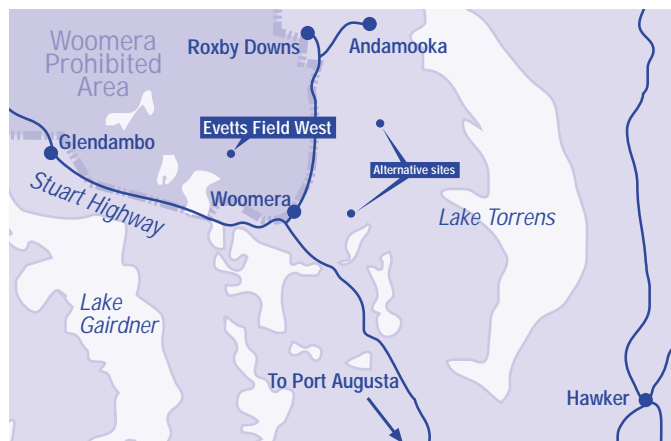
Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 (EPBC Act) and environmental assessment process is available at: www.environment.gov.au/epbc/index.html

Who prepares the EIS

ISR will commission a team of specialists with experience in all relevant fields to prepare the EIS.

The team, which will carry out a full assessment of the potential impacts of the repository on various aspects of the environment, will include individuals and groups of people specialising in:

- fauna and flora;
- geology and geophysics;
- hydrogeology;
- Aboriginal culture and heritage;
- socio-economic issues;
- transport, operation and security; and
- risk assessment.



The proposed repository site at Evetts Field West in the Woomera Prohibited Area.

How the environmental assessment process works

All Commonwealth activities or proposals that may have a significant impact on the environment must be submitted to the Minister for Environment and Heritage, Senator Hill, for approval.

In the case of the National Radioactive Waste Repository, this was done on 24 January 2001, with Senator Hill deciding on 2 March 2001 that the project should be the subject of a full environmental impact assessment (EIS).

We welcome your views

The Department of Industry, Science and Resources welcomes your views about this newsletter and the National Radioactive Waste Repository project. Your comments help us assess its impact and ensure that it remains relevant and informative.

Want to know more?
For more information on issues covered in The Monitor:

Internet site
<http://www.isr.gov.au/radwaste>

Email:
Repository@isr.gov.au

Postal:
National Radioactive Waste Repository,
Coal and Mineral Industries Division
Department of Industry, Science and Resources
GPO Box 9839
Canberra ACT 2601

Tollfree message:
1800 682 704 (further information can be requested by leaving a message on this number).

The EIS will:

- examine all relevant aspects of the environment that may be affected by the repository;
- evaluate the significance of risks associated with it and two alternative sites in the area; and
- assess any potential impacts it may have on the environment.

The issues to be addressed will cover:

- the authority, or legislative basis for the repository;
- why it is needed;
- possible alternatives;
- a description of the facility, its construction and operation;
- types of waste, how it will be disposed of and how it will be transported – including packaging during transport;
- the existing environment;

- Aboriginal culture and heritage;
- the impacts and risks to the environment during construction, operation, surveillance and decommissioning; and
- environmental safeguards to minimise potential impacts and risks.

Draft Guidelines for the EIS are open for public comment until 23 May 2001, after which Senator Hill will consider all comments received and modify the Draft Guidelines as necessary to produce Final Guidelines for the EIS.

An Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) will be prepared addressing the issues identified in the Final Guidelines.

The EIS will initially be released as a draft document, with another

round of public comment taking place before ISR submits a final EIS to Senator Hill for approval.

The Secretary of the Department of Environment and Heritage will then prepare a report for Senator Hill, who will make the final decision on the proposal.

In considering whether to approve the proposal, he will take into account:

- environmental, economic and social matters;
- the principles of ecologically sustainable development;
- the views of relevant Commonwealth Ministers; and
- any other relevant information about the environmental impacts of the action.

He also may attach conditions to any approval.

Where to find the Draft Guidelines

The Draft EIS Guidelines are being advertised in national and relevant regional newspapers.

They may also be found:

- on the Environment Australia web site (www.environment.gov.au/epbc/public_notices/index.html);
- in public libraries and Local Government offices in Central North SA; and
- on the Department of Industry Science and Resources web site (www.isr.gov.au/radwaste/whatsnew.html)
- or by ringing Environment Australia's Community Information Unit on 1800 803 772

Written submissions quoting the title of the referral and reference number 2001/51 can be sent until 23 May 2001 to:

- Senior Project Officer, National Low Level Radioactive Waste Repository EIS, Environment Assessment and Approvals Branch, Environment Australia, GPO Box 787 Canberra ACT 2601

Comments should be legible, preferably typed, and in black.

Further information is available from Environment

Australia's Community Information Unit on its toll free telephone number: 1800 803772.

The various types of waste

Radioactive waste arises from the beneficial use of radioactive materials in medicine, industry and research.

The various types of radioactive waste are defined in Australia in line with international guidelines.

Typical examples of the types of waste that will be disposed of in the national repository are:

Low Level Waste

- contaminated soil from research;
- clothing, paper and glassware from research and medical use;

- domestic smoke detectors;
- radium painted watches and compasses;
- some sealed sources used by industry and for medical and research purposes.

Short-lived Intermediate Level Waste

- industrial gauges;
- exit signs;
- some sealed sources and electron tubes.