

Muckaty waste dump

The Federal Government's plan for a radioactive waste dump on contested Aboriginal land in the Northern Territory has always been unpopular and is looking increasingly unlikely.
Dave Sweeney reports.

There is a world of difference between the lore and sands of central Australia and the law and streets of Melbourne's legal precinct but the two collide in a Federal Court move by Traditional Owners to oppose the proposed Muckaty waste dump, north of Tennant Creek.

The plan for a national radioactive waste dump plan is long running and deeply flawed. The Howard Government spent a lot of time, money and political capital in a divisive and unsuccessful search for a remote site to dump Australia's radioactive waste.

Federal Labor was highly critical of this approach and promised to do things differently and better. Resource Minister Martin Ferguson has ignored policy and promises, however, preferring to illustrate Einstein's definition of insanity: doing the same thing over and over again expecting different results.

But the results attest to a plan that lacks scientific and procedural credibility, a growing chorus of critics, a continuing failure to responsibly or effectively engage an important public policy debate, and a deeply divided and sceptical Indigenous community.

Community members, with the support of law firm Maurice Blackburn and others, are contesting the validity of the nomination of a site at Muckaty. They maintain that both the Northern Land Council and the Commonwealth have failed to accurately identify, consult with and receive consent from Traditional Owners and are seeking to end the plan.

They are garnering support in a diverse range of places with recent film screenings of *Muckaty Voices* www.beyondnuclearinitiative.com/video in Berlin along with *Manuwangu under the Nuclear Cloud*, a new photographic exhibition documenting the country and community impacted by the dump plan that is set to tour Australia in 2012.

Minister Ferguson's heavy handed dump legislation has not been passed by the Senate and the need for responsible radioactive waste management rather than politically expedient remote dumping will feature at December's ALP National Conference in Sydney. Traditional Owners will join environment and public health critics of the Muckaty plan to highlight the need for a new approach based on the principles of non-imposition, community consent and scientific and procedural rigour.

The fight to stop a dump at Muckaty – or on any remote and marginalised community – is an important test of our national maturity. The science of radioactive waste management might be complex but the ethical dimension is simple. It is neither proper nor acceptable for Australia's worst radioactive wastes to be dumped on the lands of Australia's first peoples and we must ensure that fundamental citizenship entitlements are in no way linked to a poor community's acceptance of a very poor plan. Until this happens the radioactive resistance will continue to grow, as Muckaty Traditional Owner Dianne Stokes makes crystal clear:

"We have been asking for someone to come and sit with us so that we can talk to them face to face. We want to keep talking about it and continue to fight it until we are listened to. A big capital NO."

Visit www.acfonline.org.au/muckaty