

'Keystone Cops' uranium regulation shows need for immediate reform

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The Traditional Aboriginal Owners of the Ranger mine site in Kakadu, the Mirarr People, have reiterated their call for immediate improved regulation of uranium mining following revelations on ABC-TV's 7.30 Report tonight that Aboriginal people (including Mirarr) consumed water prior to it being adequately tested by authorities and that machinery contaminated with uranium left the mine site and polluted a local CDEP yard.

The revelations follow reports last month that workers at Ranger were exposed to mine process water contaminated with 8,000 parts per billion uranium (400 times the drinking water standard) in their drinking water supply and that some 150,000 litres of water contaminated with uranium levels estimated at five times the drinking water standard spilled from the Jabiru East drinking water supply off the mine site and into the local environment.

Executive officer of Gundjeihmi Aboriginal Corporation, Andy Ralph, said Mirarr and other Aboriginal people had performed day labour with the Environmental Institute of the Supervising Scientist (ERISS) on 5 April and had ingested Jabiru East water that was yet to be cleared by authorities. He said that while tests of the water conducted on 6 April indicate that it was not contaminated, a test carried out four days earlier showed a level of 19 parts per billion (ppb) uranium, just under the drinking water standard of maximum 20 ppb.

"It remains uncertain exactly what levels of uranium were in the water that Traditional Owners and ERISS staff drank. Regardless of any readings the main inlet water valve remains padlocked and tagged 'do not drink this water'. What is evident is that this water was not cleared by authorities and was not meant for human consumption. The fact that such a blunder could happen in the very offices of the Supervising Scientist, the Commonwealth regulator of Ranger's activities, is embarrassing proof that the regulatory system is patently inadequate."

The senior traditional owner of the Mirarr People, Yvonne Margarula, told ABC-TV that she is increasingly worried for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people living and working in Kakadu and called on the mining company Energy Resources of Australia (ERA) and government to better protect people.

"I felt bad about the staff and our members working there who drank the water and I'm worried myself. I'm worried about me and my organisation getting blamed. All we need is for the staff at ERISS and the mine itself to look after our members working there because otherwise we'll have problems with our own people and people from other clans," Ms Margarula said.

Mr Ralph said that Mirarr are especially concerned that the focus of ERA's attention in the days following the contamination was on the drinking water system at the mine itself, instead of areas off the mine site such as Jabiru East. "In its haste to recommence operations at Ranger, ERA focussed on decontaminating the mine site itself. Jabiru East and the health of the public at large were obviously deemed less of a priority. Traditional Owners, other Aboriginal people and the broader community who put their trust in ERA, the Supervising Scientist and the Northern Territory regulator deserve better.

"With what's happened over the past few weeks you wouldn't put ERA and the government regulators in charge of a sandpit in your local playground," Mr Ralph said.

ABC-TV has also revealed that in a separate series of incidents, ERA allowed machinery contaminated with uranium to leave the Ranger site and pollute the workplace of the local Community Development Employment Project (CDEP). It was shown that machinery hired from the CDEP operation by ERA was returned to CDEP contaminated, despite being given decontamination clearance certificates. In other cases, no clearance certificates were issued at all.

"To allow contaminated material to leave the Ranger mine site is one thing, but to allow contaminated machinery to be returned back to the CDEP yard is an unbelievable act of negligence," Mr Ralph said.

"This machinery is used on Kakadu outstations, the caravan park and the school, by not adhering to strict procedures the company has potentially put a large section of the community at risk."

Mr Ralph said that ERA now appears to have breached at least two of the environmental requirements it is obliged to meet under its Commonwealth authority to mine at Ranger. Environmental requirement 1.2(c) states "the company must ensure that operations at Ranger do not result in an adverse effect on the health of Aboriginals and other members of the regional community by ensuring that exposure to radiation and chemical pollutants is as low as reasonably achievable" Environmental requirement 3.4 states that "process water must be totally contained within a closed system"

He said there is now ample evidence to support an overhaul of the regulation of uranium mining in Kakadu. He reiterated the earlier call of Gundjeihmi for a taskforce to be established, comprising Traditional Owners and their representatives, ERA and government regulators, to implement recommendations of the 2003 Senate inquiry into uranium mining.