

BHP, uranium mining and water

by Ned K.

BHP Billiton's proposal to expand its Roxby Downs Olympic Dam uranium mine to become the largest open cut mine in the southern hemisphere is creating a lot of debate in the lead up to the South Australian parliamentary elections on 20 March 2010.

On the 20 January, a full page article in *The Advertiser* by David Noonan of the Australian Conservation Foundation, argued that the expansion should not go ahead.

Noonan said that the mine expansion will increase CO₂ emissions in SA by more than 12 percent. This increase is equivalent to 4.1m tonnes of CO₂ a year, which is like putting 1 million inefficient cars on the roads or doubling



Olympic Dam uranium mine takes free water from the Great Artesian Basin

the CO₂ emissions from cars currently driven in Adelaide.

Noonan said that the new mine

will burn more than 1 million tonnes of diesel fuel a day, and that BHP is seeking a public subsidy of more than \$65 million a year in diesel rebates through the 6 year construction period and on-going mining operations.

He further points out that the Rann Labor government has made no firm commitment to reach the 2020 IPCC target of 25 percent CO₂ emission reduction. He asks, "is this the state government's support for BHP at any cost?"

"At any cost" could be right. A couple of days after the article appeared, ABC radio recorded a snippet from Treasurer Foley, who said that the Liberal Party's support for relocating BHP's desalination plant from Pt. Lowly near Whyalla to the Great Australian Bight west coast would put at risk the whole mine expansion, because of the cost of piping the water to the mine.

Foley proudly said that he was completely in support of BHP's plan to locate the desalination plant at Pt. Lowly in order to make the running of the mine expansion as cost effective (profitable) as possible.

And why is a desalination plant needed? Simply because BHP has nearly drained the Great Artesian Basin dry for use of the mine so far. They have not paid for any of this water.

Rann government in hot water

On the 22 January there were many 'Letters to the Editor' in *The Advertiser* in response to Noonan's article.

Even the CEO of the Australian Uranium Association had a go. He did not deny Noonan's claims about CO₂ emissions, but claimed that these were more than offset by the nuclear power generated overseas from the mine's uranium, as nuclear power he claims, is CO₂ emission free.

This claim is hotly disputed by many environmental scientists because of the

enormous amounts of energy needed to build and run nuclear plants. All other 'Letters to the Editor' were against the mine expansion on environmental grounds.

Even the Murdoch press

Why does the only mass distribution paper of Adelaide, owned by Murdoch, seemingly give so much favourable press to those opposed to the mine expansion?

One reason is that many people, including some sections of the bourgeoisie in South Australia, fear the impact of the desalination plant proposed by BHP on the marine environment of the Spencer Gulf. It is a threat to the fishing industry of the Gulf region and is likely to wipe the unique breeding grounds of the giant cuttlefish.

Perhaps another reason is that *The Advertiser* will run any story which discredits the Rann government in the hope that their preferred party in office, the Liberal Party, can win the coming state election.

A third reason is that the level of concern of many South Australians about CO₂ emissions, pollution and the scarcity of water resources is so high that the monopoly media cannot ignore it.

On radio talk-back on 23 January, listeners were asked to ring the station and say who they would vote for and why, if an election was held on that day. The vast majority of callers said that they would not vote Labor. Some said they had voted Labor all their life but not this time, because Rann was not listening to the people. The issues of environment and water were raised by most callers.

Not that a Liberal Government will stand in the way of the likes of BHP. However BHP, like the present state government, is also "on the nose".

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