

# URANIUM IN THE WEST: GOING NOWHERE FAST

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I'm happy to start this article by saying there is not one single uranium mine operating in Western Australia (WA)! After eight years since the ban was lifted on uranium mining in WA - there is still no mine. Following 250+ uranium drilling programs across the state there have been just four mine proposals - one and a half with conditional environmental approval (distinctly different from a final approval) and two and half being assessed by the WA EPA as we speak. This is not a lot considering the uranium-hype, unstinting

Government support and \$300 million of public money to support the industry.

In recent months there has been a rush of activity from uranium miners lodging environment management plans for assessment. Companies are desperately seeking some level of approval for mine proposals ahead of the 2017 state election when we could see a state Labor Government and the reintroduction of a ban on uranium mining.

## WA URANIUM MINE BACKGROUNDER:

**The Wiluna proposal** has been the dysfunctional poster child of uranium mining in WA. The proposal is for six open pits across two lake systems - Lake Way and Lake Maitland - in the East Murchison/Northern Goldfields. The mines would produce 50 million tonnes of radioactive mine waste tailings, this waste would progressively fill two of the pits on the western edge of Lake Way. The area experiences periodic flooding from the tail-end of cyclones coming off the west coast that threatens the stability and containment of mine waste.

The company, Toro Energy, who are a small inexperienced company, were forced to expand their project after acknowledging that their original proposal was not profitable, that the uranium deposit was too small and the ore grade was too low. The environmental approval for half the project (the Lake Way and Centipede deposits) is subject to 45 conditions

that explicitly prohibits any construction or preparatory works until the 45 conditions are met. The WA EPA is currently assessing the other half of the proposal, the Millipede and Lake Maitland deposits. The proposal was met with 2,000 submissions opposing the project.

**The Kintyre uranium proposal** is in an area excised from the Karlamilyi National Park (WA's biggest national park), east of Newman in the Pilbara. The proposed mine is at a place called Waturarra and it lies between two branches of the Yantikutji creek, which supports a number of rare and endangered species and is part of the Martu native-title-determined area. Martu people have fought against uranium mining on their country since the 1980s. During the homelands movement the Parnngurr (Cotton Creek) community was re-established as a protest camp against uranium exploration in the region. Despite this long held opposition, the company, Cameco, has progressed the



Images: Wiluna - Mia Pepper





Images: Kintyre - Mia Pepper

mine proposal and now has environmental approval for the mine, though it is subject to 36 conditions - much like the conditions mentioned above these conditions also prohibit the company from doing any work on the ground without meeting those 36 conditions. Cameco has not progressed in meeting these conditions since they received conditional environmental approval in 2015.

Cameco is a Canadian company and the World's biggest uranium miner who also produce nuclear fuel. Where there are many uranium mines there are many problems and Cameco's projects have been the cause for many of these problems. From alleged tax avoidance in Canada and the US to pit collapse, numerous chemical spills, ongoing seepage, flooding, and radiation from mines found outside the mine area. Cameco are also behind plans to mine uranium at Yeelirrie, just near Wiluna.

**Yeelirrie** in the local Wongutha Language means 'place of death', a warning for future generations. The traditional owners have fought against mine proposals at Yeelirrie for over 40 years, these protests continue today with a month long protest walk every year through the areas under threat from mining. These walks are led by the local Walkatjurra Rangers. The proposal for Yeelirrie is to mine a 9km long stretch of shallow calcrete uranium, which has neighbouring pastoralists up in arms; they are concerned about the dust and water and worried this will affect their cattle and their health. Environmentalists are worried that this mine could make 15 species of subterranean fauna extinct. These 15 stygofauna and troglofauna species are endemic and have only ever been found in the impact area of the mine pit, it is also extremely likely this is the only place on earth these little ground dwelling critters live. Mining their only habitat could make them extinct.

The last of the four sites is **Mulga Rock**, which is north east of Kalgoorlie above the Queen Victoria Springs Nature Reserve. Mulga Rock is in a Priority Ecological Community, which supports a large diversity of desert mammals like the Mulgara, Dunnart, Marsupial Mole and various native mice. This proposal is for four major pits and a few smaller ones using 15 million litres of water a day. The company behind these plans is Vimy Resources, formerly Energy Minerals Australia, which is now run almost entirely by former Fortescue Metals Group and Minderoo Group's executives, one former Liberal MP and is one third owned by Twiggy Forest.

Companies like Cameco have deep pockets, time on their side and are not likely to give up. Toro and Vimy, the small local players, are pushing ahead with more desperation as these projects define their existence as companies. Without financial support at a time when the uranium price is in the doldrums they may not survive. The uranium price is currently sitting on US \$32/lb, down from last years high of US \$39/lb. Cameco, Vimy and Toro have all acknowledged that the uranium price needs to be at about US \$55/lb to break even and more like US \$65-\$70/lb to warrant new mines. Since 2013, the uranium price has steadily dropped and uranium production has declined, as have the number of people employed by the sector.

With a lack of bipartisan support for uranium mining in WA, a low and stagnant uranium price and strong community opposition to uranium mining, these projects are going nowhere fast. We should urge companies and government to reconsider their options as the future turns to renewables.

*To read more about the economics of the uranium sector have a look at the ACF report "Yellowcake Fever" from 2013, which is still very relevant today.*

Images: Yeelirrie - Mia Pepper

