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## **BHP Billiton's uranium quest has too many risks**

Thousands of ordinary Australians, including my own family have benefited from BHP Billiton's mining success. However, like increasing numbers of BHP Billiton shareholders, we are troubled by the long-term effects of some aspects of its mining projects.

These include the Olympic Dam uranium/copper mine in South Australia, the proposed Yeelirrie uranium mine in Western Australia, mining coal directly beneath the rivers which provide a significant portion of Sydney's diminishing water supply, the increasing number of worker fatalities at BHP Billiton operations, and the withholding of trust funds from traditional owners whose land is being mined.

The experience at Olympic Dam should worry supporters of uranium mining in Western Australia. BHP Billiton uses 37million litres of water daily at Olympic Dam, for which the company pays nothing. The water is taken from the Great Artesian Basin, and its unsustainable extraction has adversely affected numerous Mound Springs precious isolated oases, some of which are host to unique flora and fauna.

As a shareholder, I would much rather that the company invests in a less damaging water supply system.

If the proposed Olympic Dam open-pit mine goes ahead, the mine will need 260million litres a day, most of it from a proposed desalination plant which has stirred considerable controversy in South Australia. Its power consumption will be enormous and the siting could hardly be worse for the life of the Spencer Gulf.

The production of radioactive tailings waste is projected to increase from 10million tonnes each year to 68million tonnes. The tailings dams now rise more than 20m above the landscape and cover many square kilometres. BHP Billiton intends these tailings piles to increase to 60m high and to cover up to 44sqkm.

The tailings contain finely ground long-lived radioactive materials in a toxic, acidic soup with a seasoning of other heavy metals. They are responsible for large numbers of bird deaths more than 100 bird deaths were recorded in a four-day survey in 2004. Only constant watering prevents the radioactive dust being blown across Australia.

There have already been numerous spills and leaks. In 2008 a BHP Billiton worker supplied the media with photographs of a leak from the massive tailings dam. Sadly the company's response was to threaten "disciplinary action" against any worker caught taking photos of the mine site.

The tailings will remain as a radioactive and toxic dust long after the mine has expired, there is a serious risk tailings waste will be slowly but steadily spread by wind, rain, birds and animals over centuries to come.

The proposed new open-pit mine will produce 5.3million to 5.9million tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions annually, making it all but impossible for South Australia to meet its legislated target to reduce greenhouse emissions by 60 per cent by 2050. It is not true that uranium is a low-carbon energy source and certainly not in its mining and

processing, in decommissioning of nuclear reactors and in unresolved nuclear waste management. But if we are to consistently follow the greenhouse emissions line of thought then BHP Billiton also ought to account for the greenhouse emissions arising from its coal exports.

BHP Billiton enjoys special legal privileges exempting the Olympic Dam mine from the Natural Resources Act, the Freedom of Information Act, the Water Act, the Aboriginal Heritage Act and the Environment Protection Act. The company has no intention of giving up these legal privileges. This places BHP Billiton above state laws.

This is hardly what we expect of a "responsible corporate citizen". A recent paper by Australian nuclear radiologist Dr Peter Karamoskos concludes that the average miner at Olympic Dam has a 1:670 chance of contracting cancer, most likely lung cancer, as a result of working at the mine. I see no evidence that workers are properly informed of these risks.

Miners are given face masks to filter out the radioactive particulate matter. However, many underground miners find the masks extremely uncomfortable in the hot underground environment. It is estimated that about 50 per cent of underground uranium miners in Australia do not use their masks and are thus at greater risk of lung cancer.

Yeelirrie, I'm told by local Koara-Wongutha leaders, means "death". As a long-time shareholder in this company I cannot support the mining of an area which for thousands of years has been known as dangerous to the extent of being referred to as the place of death. Uranium mining is different from other mining, the safety of workers is more complicated, the legacy of the mine on the environment is much longer and intractable.

The inevitable hazards to the health of human and other living creatures, the potential for diversion of nuclear materials for weapons and the generation of radioactive waste are frightening. With many other BHP Billiton shareholders we are disappointed in our company's push to be part of this toxic industry. Until it acquired the Olympic Dam mine, the company was proudly nuclear-free.

This seems to be a risky investment, the next asbestos, but far more dangerous to all of us. In Western Australia the economy has boomed without uranium mining. BHP Billiton has grown and returned great profits to its shareholders without uranium.

Uranium is unnecessary for the Australian economy, the Western Australian economy, for BHP Billiton and for its shareholders.

*John Poppins is a retired engineer who acts as coordinator of the BHP Billiton Shareholders for Social Responsibility.*

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