Australian Government

Draft Australian radioactive waste management framework

For consultation

2026

industry.gov.au

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The Australian Government recognises the First Peoples of this Nation and their ongoing cultural and spiritual connections to the lands, waters, seas, skies, and communities.

We acknowledge First Nations Peoples as the Traditional Custodians and Lore Keepers of the oldest living culture and pay respects to their Elders past and present. We extend that respect to all First Nations Peoples.

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Executive summary

Australia generates radioactive waste from a range of sources, including research, medicine production, industry and defence activities. This waste arises as a by-product of technologies and capabilities that provide significant benefits to Australians, supporting healthcare, scientific advancement, economic activity and national security.

Across Australia, this waste is currently stored in temporary facilities managed by individual waste holders. These arrangements are subject to robust regulatory oversight and provide a safe and secure solution in the short term, however, temporary storage is not designed to manage radioactive waste for the long term.

While existing storage practices ensure the safe management of radioactive waste today, permanent disposal solutions are required to protect people and the environment over the long term. Temporary storage facilities depend on ongoing active intervention by people to keep them safe and secure, whereas facilities designed for permanent disposal do not. Establishing fit-for-purpose disposal infrastructure will enable Australia to manage both current and future waste safely and securely, reduce ongoing risk and liability, and avoid passing an undue burden to future generations.

Implementing radioactive waste disposal in Australia presents technical, political, legal, and social licence challenges, with programs extending over decades and across multiple electoral cycles. Progress requires sustained government commitment, rigorous technical work, and meaningful engagement with communities and stakeholders. The Australian Government recognises that establishing disposal facilities depends on building and maintaining public trust, including with First Nations rights holders and Traditional Custodians of Country.

In this context, the Australian Government is progressing a national approach to move from temporary storage to permanent disposal. This includes clarifying roles and responsibilities, developing the national inventory of radioactive waste, and advancing pathways for safe, secure and sustainable long-term management, in line with international obligations and best practice. Implementation will be progressed through a staged and coordinated program, allowing decisions to be informed by evidence, engagement, regulatory requirements and international best practice.

The Australian Government's overarching priority is to protect people and the environment through safe, secure and sustainable radioactive waste management, shaped by robust regulation and Australia's international obligations. It includes maintaining safe and effective storage arrangements while long-term disposal pathways are developed and implemented.

Introduction

This version of the Australian Radioactive Waste Management Framework updates the framework issued in April 2018. It reflects significant developments in Australia's radioactive waste management landscape, including the establishment of the Australian Radioactive Waste Agency (ARWA) in 2020; the 2021 announcement of Australia's future acquisition of conventionally-armed, nuclear-powered submarines under the AUKUS agreement; the 2023 decision not to pursue previously shortlisted and nominated sites for the National Radioactive Waste Management Facility; and the emergence of non-government providers of radioactive waste management services, including disposal of some low-level radioactive wastes.

Purpose

The Australian Government's overarching objective is to ensure the safe and secure management of Australia's radioactive waste, protecting people and the environment for current and future generations.

The Australian Radioactive Waste Management Framework sets the strategic direction for the management and disposal of all current and future Commonwealth radioactive waste in Australia. It outlines the existing waste inventory and storage arrangements and establishes the Australian Government's approach to developing and implementing permanent disposal solutions.

The framework also defines the roles and responsibilities of Commonwealth agencies, state and territory regulators, and waste generators and holders. It has been developed by ARWA on behalf of the Australian Government in consultation with key government, regulatory, and industry stakeholders, and is intended to be an enduring document that will be updated periodically as required.

The framework also emphasises the importance of ongoing engagement with state and territory governments, regulators, industry, and communities – including First Nations peoples – to support safe, secure, and sustainable management of radioactive waste in Australia over the long term.

Scope

The framework applies to the management of all current and future Commonwealth radioactive waste, including waste generated through Commonwealth programs and joint ventures to which the Commonwealth is a party.

While its primary focus is on Commonwealth waste, the framework recognises that Commonwealth disposal facilities may provide a disposal pathway for other Australian waste holders, including state, territory, and private sector entities, supporting national consistency and potential efficiencies in radioactive waste management.

Naturally occurring radioactive material (NORM), typically generated by the mining sector and regulated by state and territory jurisdictions, is not within scope. However, NORM waste associated with Commonwealth research activities is included.

Radioactive waste in Australia today

What waste does Australia have?

Radioactive waste in Australia is defined as 'material that has no further foreseeable use and contains radioactive materials with activities or activity concentrations at levels where regulatory oversight is needed to ensure safety' (ARPANSA n.d.b)

This waste emits radiation that can be harmful to people and the environment in both the short and longer term, however, the level of radioactivity will reduce naturally over time in a well understood process called radioactive decay. Radioactive wastes may also present other hazards. As with other types of waste, managing these hazards is critical to protect human health and the environment, and to avoid placing an undue burden on future generations.

Radioactive waste is already present across Australia, stored at more than 100 locations, and continues to be generated through essential activities such as nuclear medicine production, research, and industry. The volumes of radioactive waste are low compared with other types of hazardous waste present in Australia, but it is important that it is managed safely.

Much of Australia's existing radioactive waste is classified as low-level waste (LLW), which emits small amounts of radiation and usually needs minimal shielding during handling and transport. Examples include gloves, gowns and clothes used when producing nuclear medicines and conducting nuclear research.

Australia also has existing waste classified as intermediate-level waste (ILW), which emits higher levels of radiation, needs extra shielding, and can remain hazardous for a longer time. Examples include waste from nuclear medicine production and some of the waste from operating the Australian Nuclear Science and Technology Organisation (ANSTO)'s OPAL nuclear research reactor (ANSTO n.d.)

High-level waste (HLW) emits high levels of radiation, requires further shielding, and generates significant heat during the decay process. While Australia does not currently have any HLW awaiting disposal, it is expected that the future decommissioning of Australia's conventionally armed, nuclear-powered submarines will produce spent nuclear fuel that will need to be managed.

Radioactive waste within these classifications will have different physical and chemical properties, as well as differing types and amounts of radioactive material. Such waste needs to be managed in different ways and potentially requires different types of disposal facilities to ensure they minimise the risk of harm to people and the environment.

Further information about radioactive waste, the national inventory and classification of radioactive waste in Australia is available from the following sources:

- Radioactive waste in Australia (available via the Department of Industry, Science and Resources website)
- Australia's National Inventory of Radioactive Waste (2024). The Australian National Inventory of Radioactive Waste (ANIRW) is available via the Department of Industry, Science and Resources website.
- Australian National Report to the Joint Convention on the Safety of Spent Fuel Management and on the Safety of Radioactive Waste Management (available via the ARPANSA website).
- Australia's formal radioactive waste classification system for radiation safety purposes is described in ARPANSA's Radiation Protection Service G-4 publication, *Guide for Classification of Radioactive Waste*, 2020 .
- The Australian classification scheme for disposal of radioactive waste is based on IAEA Classification of Radioactive Waste GSG-1, 2009, which considers the safety of disposal pathways, according to the level of radioactivity and the time it takes for the radioactivity to decline to a safe level (IAEA 2009).

Where does Australia's waste come from?

All Australians benefit from nuclear technologies such as life-saving nuclear medicine, advancements in agriculture and mining, and national defence. Every Australian is likely to benefit from nuclear medicine and on average will have at least 2 nuclear medicine procedures in their lifetime. These technologies generate radioactive waste that needs to be managed responsibly.

Most radioactive waste held by the Australian Government comes from the operation of research reactors and the production of nuclear medicines. This radioactive waste is currently stored by ANSTO at its Lucas Heights site in New South Wales.

The Department of Defence holds older waste from the former Australian Radiation Laboratory, the Commonwealth X-ray and Radium Laboratory and old defence equipment that is no longer used. Most of this waste is stored in the Woomera Prohibited Area in South Australia.

Other radioactive waste is generated through:

- industrial processes (mining, oil and gas exploration, agriculture, manufacturing)
- research and education (universities, hospitals, schools)
- defence programs, including the future acquisition and operation of nuclear-powered submarines under AUKUS.

Future decommissioning and demolition of nuclear facilities will also produce radioactive waste.

Radioactive waste management

Radioactive waste already exists and is stored safely and securely by waste holders across Australia, often adjacent to where it is produced. Storage involves temporarily holding waste in facilities where it remains accessible, but requires ongoing active management. Radioactive waste will continue to be generated in Australia through ongoing work in areas like nuclear medicine, industry and defence.

The waste hierarchy

In line with international best practice, Australia's approach to radioactive waste management is underpinned by the waste hierarchy, which prioritises actions that minimise risks and impacts to people and the environment. The hierarchy applies to all waste types, including radioactive waste, and consists of 5 elements: prevention, minimisation, reuse, recycling and disposal (Table 1).

Table 1. The waste hierarchy in radioactive waste management

Hierarchy level	Principle	Action
Waste prevention	The most effective way to manage radioactive waste is to avoid generating it.	Planning, design, process optimisation, and use of alternative materials or technologies that eliminate radioactive waste generation.
Waste minimisation	If generation of radioactive waste is unavoidable, minimise the amount of waste that is generated.	Minimising use of radioactive materials and optimising procedures or using technologies to reduce waste volumes and activity levels.
Reuse	Extend the useful life of materials and equipment before they become waste.	Refurbishing or reusing equipment and components where it is safe and practical, delaying their entry into the waste stream.
Recycling	Recover material or energy from waste where feasible.	Treating components (e.g. metals) to process them into a form that can be reclaimed and used again as a material.
Disposal	Safely isolate waste from people and the environment for the period required for it to decay to a level that no longer presents a hazard.	Placing waste in suitably engineered facilities for long-term isolation and containment, with no intention of retrieval.

Note: The hierarchy is presented in order of preference, from prevention through to disposal as the final step.

The waste hierarchy provides the theoretical framework underpinning radioactive waste management. It establishes an order of preference for managing waste that prioritises avoidance, minimisation, reuse, recycling and, as a final step, disposal.

Applying this hierarchy supports the Australian Government's commitment to sustainability by reducing the volume of radioactive waste requiring disposal and ensuring the most effective use of future disposal facilities.

The radioactive waste management lifecycle

The waste lifecycle reflects how radioactive waste is currently managed in practice. As waste already exists, it describes the end-to-end process for its safe and secure management from generation through to disposal, and represents the practical application of the waste hierarchy. See Figure 2 below for more information.

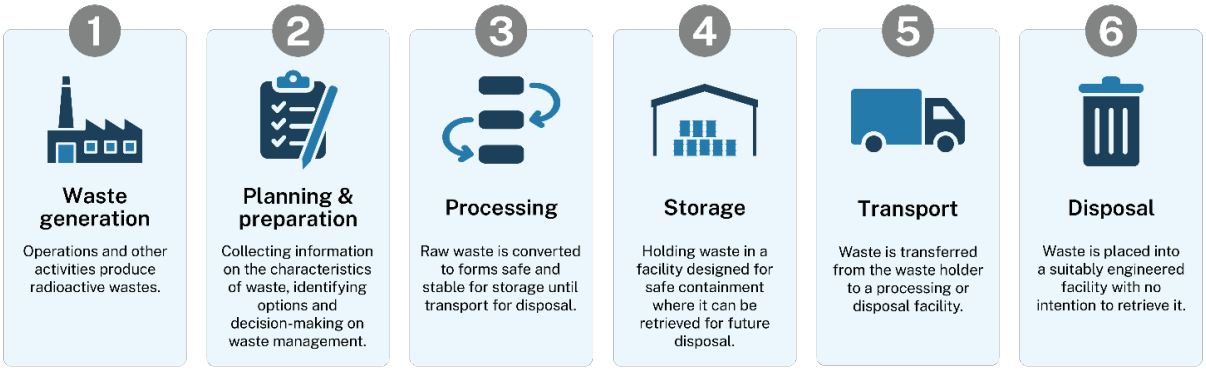


Figure 2. Radioactive waste management lifecycle

The depicted sequence is a representative example of the radioactive waste management process from the generation of waste through to disposal. Steps in the radioactive waste management lifecycle may be iterative or non-linear.

Radioactive waste must be managed safely over its full lifecycle, which means maintaining effective storage arrangements whilst disposal pathways are implemented.

Waste management practice today

Building on the waste hierarchy and lifecycle, current waste management practice in Australia reflects a system where waste holders are responsible for managing their radioactive waste through each stage of the lifecycle. Waste holders are actively taking steps to apply the hierarchy in practice, including minimising waste generation and ensuring waste is appropriately processed and stored safely and securely.

While waste is stored safely and securely at multiple locations across the country by waste holders, Australia does not yet have disposal capability for all types of radioactive

waste. As a result, storage remains an interim measure, with waste retained in temporary facilities pending the development of appropriate disposal solutions.

From temporary storage to permanent disposal

Storage can be maintained safely in the short term, but only through ongoing human intervention, including monitoring, maintenance, and periodic refurbishment of facilities and waste packages. In practice, temporary storage can extend for decades, but sustaining safety over longer timeframes relies on continued oversight and resourcing. For some radioactive wastes, these timeframes can extend from hundreds to many thousands of years.

Disposal, by contrast, provides a permanent solution. Engineered disposal facilities are designed for passive safety, meaning they remain safe without the need for ongoing human intervention. They isolate wastes long enough for radioactivity to reduce naturally, removing the reliance on future generations to actively maintain safety.

There are 2 broad categories of radioactive waste disposal facility:

- Near surface disposal (NSD) facility – a disposal facility that is located at surface or within tens of metres below the surface, suitable for the disposal of less hazardous radioactive waste streams.
- Deep geological disposal (DGD) facility – a disposal facility that is located hundreds of metres below the surface, suitable for the disposal of more hazardous radioactive waste streams.

Figure 3 below shows examples NSD and DGD facilities at various depths.

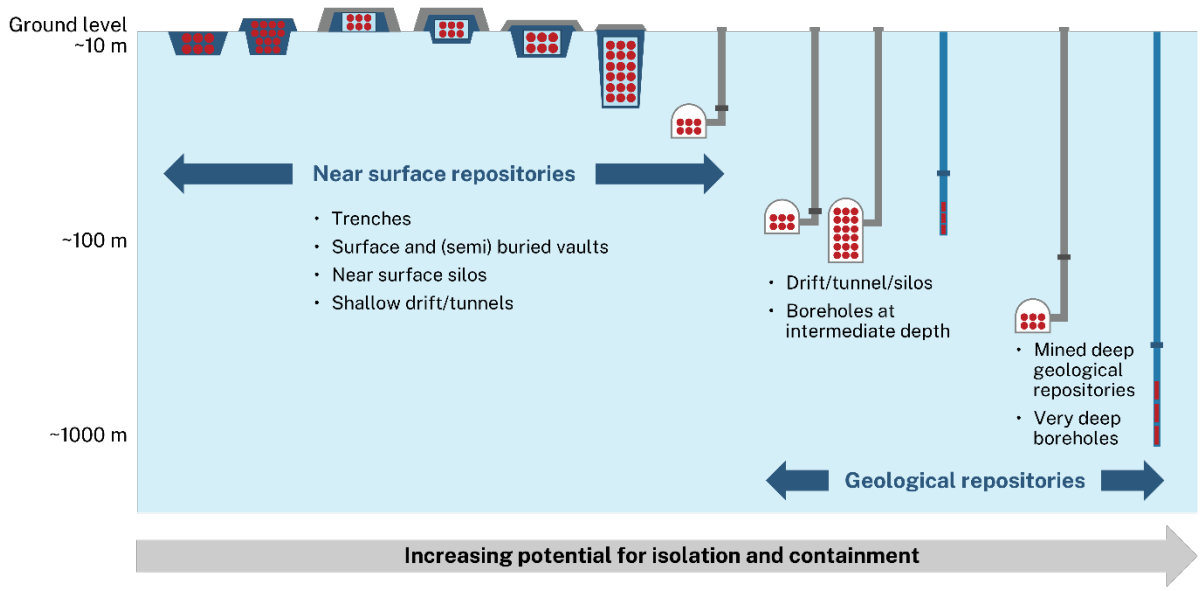


Figure 3. Near surface and geological repository examples (disposal facilities)

Adapted from 'Design Principles and Approaches for Radioactive Waste Repositories' (IAEA 2020).

NSD facilities utilise engineered barriers to contain packaged solid radioactive waste and prevent radionuclides from getting into the surrounding environment and are generally used around the world for waste that will remain hazardous for no more than 300 years.

DGD would also involve packaged solid radioactive waste being encapsulated within engineered barriers, but within a suitable geological location at several hundred metres depth below the ground. There, the combination of the engineered and natural barriers of rock combine to create a whole system that provides safety for the very long-term by isolating radionuclides from the surface.

Australia does not yet have disposal facilities for all types of radioactive waste. Until those facilities are in place, Australia cannot complete the waste management lifecycle or fully secure long-term safety, security, and protection of people and the environment.

International experience shows that disposal is deliverable but that developing effective, publicly-supported solutions takes many years, making it important to act and maintain steady progress now.

Roles and responsibilities

There are a range of organisations and entities that play vital roles in radioactive waste management in Australia. Different organisations have different roles and responsibilities and contribute to the waste management lifecycle in different ways. Key details of these organisations are set out below, and you can find more information about each of them on their websites.

Waste holders

The safe management of radioactive waste is the responsibility of waste holders, who generate, treat, package and store radioactive waste in licensed facilities, pending future disposal.

Australian Nuclear Science and Technology Organisation (ANSTO)

ANSTO operates Australia's nuclear research reactor, provides expertise to government on nuclear technologies and is a centre for nuclear science research and development and nuclear medicine production.

ANSTO safely stores and manages both low and intermediate level radioactive waste from the production of nuclear medicines, and beneficial industrial and research activities, on-site on an interim basis.

Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO)

CSIRO is Australia’s national science agency which works with industry, government and the research community to find solutions through science innovation, including in relation to radioactive waste management, thus increasing Australia’s sovereign capability.

CSIRO stores and manages LLW, and a small amount of ILW, from its research activities.

Department of Defence

Defence’s primary role is to defend Australia and its national interests, promote security and stability, and support the community as directed by the Australian Government.

The majority of waste held on Defence sites is either legacy material from the former Australian Radiation Laboratory and Commonwealth X-ray and Radium Laboratory, or material remediated from Commonwealth land. The remaining waste has arisen from the disposal of unserviceable or obsolete Defence equipment.

Australian Submarine Agency (ASA)

ASA is responsible for managing and overseeing the safe and secure delivery of Australia’s conventionally-armed, nuclear-powered submarine program, including the arrangements to manage radioactive waste resulting from Australia’s nuclear-powered submarines.

ASA will safely store and manage radioactive waste from submarine construction, operations and maintenance, as well as spent nuclear fuel produced when the

submarines are eventually decommissioned and defueled. Australia's first submarine is not expected to be decommissioned until the 2050s.

Other smaller Commonwealth radioactive waste holders include the National Measurement Institute, Bureau of Meteorology, Australian Antarctic Division, Australian Institute of Marine Science, and ARPANSA.

Small quantities of radioactive waste are also held and managed by entities outside the Commonwealth. These include state and territory governments, hospitals, educational institutions and other industries. For more detail on waste holders and the types and quantities of waste they manage, see the Australian National Inventory of Radioactive Waste (available via the Department of Industry, Science and Resources website).

Regulators

Independent regulators play a critical role in radioactive waste management by establishing and enforcing the requirements that ensure waste is managed safely, securely, and in a way that protects people and the environment.

Australian Radiation Protection and Nuclear Safety Agency (ARPANSA)

ARPANSA is the Australian Government's primary authority on radiation protection and nuclear safety and the independent regulator of Commonwealth entities that use or produce radioactive materials to conduct their business.

ARPANSA sets regulations and monitors compliance for handling, storage, transport and disposal of Commonwealth radioactive waste to ensure safety and protection of people and the environment from the effects of radiation. This includes licencing of a radioactive waste disposal facility for Commonwealth waste.

Australian Safeguards and Non-Proliferation Office (ASNO)

ASNO is the independent regulator and authority for nuclear security and safeguards. ASNO regulates all nuclear materials (including waste containing nuclear materials) and associated items (such as nuclear facility equipment).

ASNO regulates Commonwealth, state and territory, and private sector entities, and ensures compliance with Australia's international non-proliferation obligations.

ASNO is the nuclear security and safeguards regulator for Australia's naval nuclear propulsion program.

Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (DCCEEW)

DCCEEW leads Australia's response to climate change and sustainable energy use, and protects our environment, heritage and water.

DCCEEW will regulate compliance of future radioactive waste disposal facilities against the *Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation (EPBC) Act 1999*.

Australian Naval Nuclear Power Safety Regulator (ANNPSR)

ANNPSR is Australia's independent regulator that sets regulations and monitors compliance for facility, material and submarine activities associated with naval nuclear propulsion for Australia's conventionally-armed, nuclear-powered submarine program.

ANNPSR monitors, and, where necessary, enforces compliance with the requirements of the *Australian Naval Nuclear Power Safety Act 2024*.

Other relevant bodies

Geoscience Australia (GA)

Geoscience Australia is the nation's trusted leader of applied geoscience delivering national-scale data, analysis, services and infrastructure that government, industry and communities rely on.

Geoscience Australia provides technical advice on Australia's mineral, energy and groundwater resources, earth observation and monitoring through remote sensing, continental-scale geological mapping and analysis, and natural-hazard risks (including risks to infrastructure such as nuclear installations).

State and territory governments

State and territory governments develop, implement and evaluate policy and strategy for radioactive waste management in their jurisdiction that delivers safe, secure, and sustainable outcomes for the Australian people. They may lease or operate facilities that manage radioactive waste, and they set, manage and regulate safety and environmental protection aspects of activities by non-Commonwealth organisations that generate radioactive waste within their jurisdictions.

Private sector service providers

Private sector entities deliver a variety of services for management of some radioactive wastes, including transport, characterisation and disposal.

A national radioactive waste management organisation

The establishment of a national radioactive waste management organisation is essential for Australia to align with international best practice and fulfil its obligations under key treaties, including the Joint Convention on the Safety of Spent Fuel Management and on the Safety of Radioactive Waste Management. International experience demonstrates that effective long-term radioactive waste management requires a dedicated body with a clear mandate, specialised expertise, and a focus on safety, security, and environmental protection, separate from the interests of waste producers and operators.

A national waste management organisation requires a distinct blend of specialist technical, legal, social and policy expertise that differs substantially from the skill sets required for routine nuclear operations. Ensuring that a competent waste management organisation is in place and making progress on long-term solutions for the waste that already exists and will be produced in future is important to protect the sustainability of vital services being delivered by waste producers.

A dedicated radioactive waste management organisation helps prevent conflicts of interest by separating disposal responsibilities from waste producers, ensuring decisions are focused on long-term safety rather than operational priorities.

In line with international best practice, in 2020 the Australian Government created Australia's first national radioactive waste management organisation.

Australian Radioactive Waste Agency (ARWA)

ARWA is a division within the Department of Industry, Science and Resources with both policy and implementation functions. ARWA leads the Australian Government's approach to long-term management of radioactive waste, with the support of regulators and waste holders. ARWA does this by:

- developing and maintaining the national radioactive waste inventory
- developing national radioactive waste policy
- engaging with stakeholders in Australia and internationally
- carrying out agreed plans for managing and disposing of radioactive waste
- giving expert advice to the Australian Government, waste holders, the public and other stakeholders.

International obligations

Australia's ongoing commitments to international treaties, conventions, and agreements ensure that Australia upholds the highest standards of safety, security, safeguards and environmental protection, and that it remains a responsible member of the global community.

The IAEA, a body operating under the United Nations, serves as the leading international authority for the peaceful use of nuclear technology. It sets global safety standards and promotes member countries' compliance with their commitments under relevant international treaties and agreements regarding nuclear safety and security. The IAEA also independently verifies that member countries are meeting safeguards obligations.

Key international treaties and agreements

Australia's management of radioactive waste is shaped by a set of binding international treaties and agreements. Chief among these is the Joint Convention on the Safety of Spent Fuel Management and on the Safety of Radioactive Waste Management, which sets global standards for the safe handling, storage, and disposal of radioactive waste and spent fuel. Australia submits a National Report to the Joint Convention every 3 years.

Australia is also a party to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) and implements comprehensive IAEA safeguards to demonstrate to an independent international inspectorate that all nuclear materials and activities are used only for declared purposes. Australia participates in a range of accountability measures to confirm obligations under these treaties are being fulfilled.

Other obligations include agreements on the physical protection and safe transport of nuclear materials, prevention of marine pollution, and the responsible movement of hazardous wastes. Australia has also endorsed the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and supports its principles as a guiding international framework.

Under the Agreement between Australia, United Kingdom and United States for Cooperation related to Naval Nuclear Propulsion (AUKUS), Australia is responsible for the management, storage and disposal of any spent nuclear fuel and radioactive waste resulting from the operation of our nuclear-powered submarines, and shall not reprocess any spent nuclear fuel for naval nuclear propulsion. This will include management and disposal of operationally-derived radioactive waste (LLW and ILW) and end-of-service radioactive waste and spent nuclear fuel, in full compliance with its IAEA safeguards obligations.

Further detail on these treaties and Australia's specific obligations is provided in Appendix C to this Framework.

Implementation in Australian law and practice

Australia's international obligations are reflected in its domestic legislation and regulatory frameworks, including but not limited to the:

- ***Nuclear Non-Proliferation (Safeguards) Act 1987***
- ***South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty Act 1986***
- ***Australian Radiation Protection and Nuclear Safety Act 1998***
- ***National Radioactive Waste Management Act 2012***
- ***Australian Nuclear Science and Technology Act 1987***
- ***Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999***
- ***Australian Naval Nuclear Power Safety Act 2024***

These laws ensure that Australia meets its commitments to safety, security, safeguards, and environmental protection. Other state and territory laws may also apply.

Importance of international engagement

Australia is a member of both the IAEA, and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development – Nuclear Energy Agency (NEA).

Relevant Australian Commonwealth agencies play an active role in the work of the IAEA, and the NEA, participating in various international groups focussed on both the technical and social licence aspects of radioactive waste management. This is an area with opportunities for international collaboration, with much to learn from the experience of others with more advanced radioactive waste management programs.

Australia also engages in regional cooperation through the Regional Cooperative Agreement of Research, Development and Training related to Nuclear Science and Technology for Asia and the Pacific (RCA) and the Forum for Nuclear Cooperation in Asia (FNCA). These platforms support collaborative research, technical exchanges and policy dialogue across Asia and the Pacific, complementing Australia's participation in global forums.

The active participation of Australian agencies in international forums and adherence to global standards:

- Facilitates the sharing of experience and lessons learned, reducing risks, costs, timescales and improving program outcomes.
- Ensures that Australia's radioactive waste management is subject to international scrutiny and peer review.
- Supports Australia's reputation as a responsible nuclear steward and strengthens public and stakeholder confidence in national programs.

Long-term radioactive waste management is a challenge for all countries with nuclear programs. Other countries have progressed further towards implementing disposal pathways. Many countries have operating NSD facilities and progress is being made on DGD (e.g. in Finland, Sweden, Canada and France). While every country's situation is unique, Australia can learn from these examples.

Alongside involvement with the IAEA and NEA, ARWA and other relevant Australian Government agencies foster bilateral relationships with their equivalent organisations in other countries. These relationships promote learning, sharing of information and continuous improvement, which can benefit Australia by helping reduce costs, risks and timescales in our waste management programs.

The need for timely action on disposal

Radioactive waste exists in Australia and continues to be generated through essential activities such as nuclear medicine production, research, and industry.

Temporary storage is not a sustainable long-term strategy. Taking steps now towards permanent disposal will reduce risk and lifecycle costs, mitigate liability and ease the burden for future generations to facilitate intergenerational equity in radioactive waste management.

By moving now to develop and implement safe, sustainable and proven disposal solutions, the Australian Government can ensure that Australia manages its radioactive waste responsibly and protects both our environment and communities for generations to come. Timely commitment and action are important to secure a lasting, safe and equitable future.

The Australian Government recognises that:

- **Disposal is deliverable:** Permanent disposal, whether through NSD or DGD, is a proven, internationally accepted solution being delivered around the world. This demonstrates that safe disposal is achievable.
- **It takes time:** Engaging meaningfully with communities to identify, investigate and select potential sites, then developing, licensing, and constructing a disposal facility is a complex process that cannot be rushed. The sooner we start, the sooner we can deliver a safe, publicly acceptable solution.
- **Delaying increases risk and cost:** Waste will continue to accumulate, storage facilities and waste packages will age, and the challenge will become more difficult and expensive.
- **There are no shortcuts:** International experience shows that successful disposal programs take many years, sometimes decades, to deliver. Long-term planning with incremental and staged decision making will underpin steady progress to ensure Australia meets its responsibilities to current and future generations.

By taking steps now, the Australian Government can proactively manage risks, control costs, and relieve future generations of unnecessary burdens, ensuring a safer and more sustainable future for all Australians.

Social licence

Social licence refers to the ongoing earned trust and approval of host communities and our stakeholders. International best practice highlights that building and maintaining social licence in parallel with delivering technical excellence and the highest levels of safety, are the building blocks for successful and safe disposal of radioactive waste.

Previous unsuccessful Australian disposal programs have largely failed not on their technical merits but due to public opposition and legal challenges, typically owing to a lack of social and political acceptance.

International experience has also shown that without social licence even technically sound waste management projects are likely to face resistance, delays, or cancellation. This is crucial for a multigenerational project like radioactive waste disposal.

Placing focus on social licence aims to ensure that communities feel heard, respected, and empowered, especially when decisions affect their environment, health, culture and heritage. This supports confidence in transparency, safety and fairness of the process.

Earning, building and sustaining social licence involves more than engagement; it requires trust-building and inclusive governance, including recognition of First Nations Peoples rights and interests, and grounded in dignity, equity, and respect.

First Nations rights and interests

It is important to acknowledge that Australia's nuclear history has significantly impacted Indigenous Australians, and that recognition of these impacts must be respected when consulting with Indigenous Australians regarding radioactive waste management.

First Nations rights and interests in Australia are grounded in inherent rights to self-determination and the maintenance of distinct political, legal, economic, social and cultural institutions. These rights and interests are reinforced by international standards in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), including participation in decision-making and the objective of free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) for measures and projects that affect Indigenous peoples' lands, territories, resources and culture.

For radioactive waste management, these interests commonly arise through native title recognition and procedural rights under the Native Title Act 1993 (including future acts processes such as the right to negotiate and Indigenous Land Use Agreements), and through cultural heritage protection legislation and frameworks.

Consultation and participation should be guided by principles of inclusion, transparency, and mutual respect with First Nations peoples participation and decision-making processes meaningfully incorporated.

By engaging with international forums for learning including through the IAEA and the NEA's Forum on Stakeholder Confidence, and with relevant individual countries such as Canada, ARWA is learning from those who have already taken significant positive steps, including in recognising and addressing the importance of bringing First Nations peoples into the heart of discussions from the outset.

While it is important to recognise the distinct cultural and historical context of international experiences, they offer much to learn about the principles and practice of engaging with respect and providing the necessary support to First Nations peoples that will allow them to engage with confidence.

Learning from past and current domestic and international radioactive waste disposal programs is crucial in relation to First Nations peoples. Such reflection helps identify and address historical injustices, ensuring that Indigenous rights, cultural values, and connections to Country are respected in future projects.

Australia's way forward

This section provides a high-level overview of the Australian Government's intentions for implementing disposal pathways for radioactive waste. It outlines the strategic direction and foundational steps that will guide national efforts to move from temporary storage towards the permanent disposal of Australia's radioactive waste. By setting out these intentions, the Australian Government aims to provide clarity and confidence about the path forward for responsible waste management.

The infographic on the next page (Figure 4) summarises the key elements of the way forward from our current position to permanent solutions for the safe long term management of Australia's radioactive waste. Each of these is explained in more detail later in this section.

Central to this approach will be a number of key decisions about Australia's future disposal pathways, including:

- decide which types of facilities to progress (near surface and/or deep geological)
- decide how many site(s) are needed
- decide how sites will be identified and selected.

Element	Action
Ongoing stewardship	Maintain safe and secure interim storage while disposal pathways are progressed.
Assessing private sector capability	Assess capabilities of industry to support or participate in waste management. Leverage the best skills and technologies for safe, secure and cost-effective solutions.
New approaches to facility siting and social licence	Develop and apply new siting approaches with early, inclusive and culturally informed engagement to build social licence.
National inventory and facility planning	Update and maintain the National Inventory of Radioactive Waste to inform planning and facility design.
Collaboration on public and stakeholder engagement	Collaborate to develop new and better ways of engaging with the public and stakeholders. Support meaningful, informed dialogue and build enduring public confidence in Australia's radioactive waste management solutions.

	Engaging with states and territories	Collaborate with states and territories to solve a shared national challenge and build relationships to support long term solutions.
	National nuclear decommissioning policy	Develop and implement a national policy and strategy to manage nuclear decommissioning across the full lifecycle and minimise waste.
	Nuclear-powered submarines	Plan for the safe, secure and safeguards compliant management of submarine related waste across the full lifecycle.
	Legislative updates	Update laws and regulatory frameworks to enable safe, efficient and publicly acceptable disposal facilities.
	A staged and flexible approach	Progress disposal pathways in a staged and flexible way, adapting as new information and circumstances emerge.
	Research and development	Use research and development to advance safe, sustainable and socially responsible waste management solutions.

Figure 4: Australia's way forward

Ongoing stewardship

While disposal pathways are being progressed, maintaining safe and secure interim storage of existing waste is critical. This includes ensuring storage facilities continue to meet operational requirements through ongoing monitoring, maintenance, and regulatory oversight.

Given that disposal solutions can take many years to develop and implement, safe and secure storage will need to be maintained until disposal facilities are operational. Investment in upgraded or additional storage capacity may be required. This reinforces both the importance of maintaining current arrangements and the need to progress permanent disposal solutions.

Developing disposal pathways

The Australian Government is committed to progressing disposal pathways for Australia's radioactive waste. An important first step is to make decisions on disposal pathways, notably how many disposal site(s) are needed, which type of disposal facilities will be progressed and the approach to siting them. ARWA is leading the national effort to develop safe, secure, and sustainable disposal pathways for Australia's radioactive waste, including supporting the ASA in developing appropriate

pathways to dispose of spent nuclear fuel resulting from the future decommissioning of Australia's nuclear-powered submarines.

Assessing private sector capability

As part of developing disposal pathways, ARWA is assessing the capabilities of the private sector to support or participate in the management and disposal of Commonwealth radioactive waste. It is also critical to identify any skills gaps given the small pool of radioactive waste management experts in Australia. This includes understanding the capacity, expertise, and readiness of private industry to support safe, secure, and cost-effective waste management solutions. Engaging with industry will help ensure that Australia leverages the best available skills and technologies.

New approaches to facility siting and social licence

ARWA is developing new approaches to the siting of future disposal facilities that recognise the critical importance of social licence by working constructively with stakeholders and communities, including with First Nations peoples. Engagement in the development of these processes will be important.

The Australian Government acknowledges that any site for a radioactive waste disposal facility will require broad community support, including from First Nations peoples and specifically rights holders, and the Traditional Custodians of Country.

The Australian Government is committed to early, open, inclusive and culturally-informed engagement, building trust and understanding, and ensuring that community voices are heard and respected throughout any siting process

A staged and flexible approach

Developing disposal solutions is a complex, long-term task. The Australian Government will take a staged and flexible approach, recognising that:

- Different waste types require different technical solutions.
- Social acceptance and meaningful stakeholder engagement are essential at every step.
- Policy and technology must adapt as new information, waste streams, or international developments emerge.

By progressing work on both near surface and deep geological disposal pathways, the Australian Government is ensuring that Australia will be positioned to make decisions on safe, sustainable and fit for purpose solutions for all radioactive waste.

National inventory and facility planning

The ongoing development of Australia's National Inventory of Radioactive Waste is a critical foundation for future radioactive waste management planning. It is essential that, at the beginning of any siting process, there is clarity about what waste is planned to go into future disposal facilities. This transparency will ensure that facility designs can safely accommodate all relevant waste and will be a key issue for communities considering involvement in hosting a facility. The inventory is updated every 3 years.

Engaging with states and territories

States and territories have responsibility for policy, regulation and legislation regarding radioactive waste within their jurisdictions. The successful delivery of any new radioactive waste management facilities in Australia will require engagement with states and territories. It is important to build constructive relationships and find ways to collaborate on what is a shared problem across Australia, and to build support for action on long-term programs. Permanent facilities for Commonwealth wastes may also provide solutions for waste from non-Commonwealth entities.

Collaboration on public and stakeholder engagement

All agencies involved in radioactive waste management will continue to collaborate to develop new and better ways of engaging with the public and stakeholders. This includes providing clear, accessible information, answering questions, and addressing misconceptions or misinformation. The goal is to support meaningful, informed dialogue and build enduring public confidence in Australia's radioactive waste management solutions.

Research and development

Australia has a strong and well-coordinated research and development (R&D) capability, underpinned by leading institutions and globally ranked universities. Australia's national laboratories and research organisations can support the advancement of the technical, social and environmental challenges associated with the management of radioactive waste.

National nuclear decommissioning policy

ARWA is developing Australia's first national nuclear decommissioning policy and strategy. This policy will ensure that decommissioning is planned and managed across the full lifecycle of nuclear facilities. The policy will consider the benefits of minimising waste generation and applying the waste hierarchy by prioritising avoidance, reuse, and

recycling of waste wherever possible before considering disposal. This approach aligns with international best practice and supports safe, sustainable outcomes for current and future generations.

Nuclear-powered submarines

The acquisition of conventionally armed, nuclear-powered submarines is a whole-of-nation, multi-decade, endeavour. There is a need for a joined-up approach across government to plan for the safe, secure, efficient and safeguards-compliant management of waste associated with operating, maintaining and eventually decommissioning Australia's nuclear-powered submarines. This will require mutual support and coordination between Defence, ASA, ARWA, ASNO, ARPANSA, ANNPSR and other agencies to ensure that all radioactive waste is managed in line with Australia's international obligations, as well as high standards for safety, security, and environmental protection. Relevant Australian Government agencies will continue to work together to support ASA for the safe and efficient management of this waste.

Legislative updates

Once policy decisions have been made on future disposal pathways and the process for identifying and selecting sites, there may be a need to update relevant legislation. This will ensure that legal and regulatory frameworks support the safe, efficient, and publicly acceptable development of new disposal facilities.

Conclusion

The Australian Government is taking action to meet its national responsibilities and international obligations regarding the management of its radioactive waste. The actions that ARWA will lead with the support of other agencies, including updating the national inventory, developing and implementing waste disposal pathways and engaging with industry and communities, will lay the foundation for safe, sustainable solutions that will protect people and the environment for generations to come.

Delivering on this responsibility will require commitment, transparency, and collaboration across government, industry, and the public. There are no shortcuts. Through collaborative effort to create solutions that are both technically sound and socially acceptable, planning carefully, and taking decisions on a staged basis, the government will ensure Australia's radioactive waste is managed sustainably and to the highest standards both now and for the long-term.

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Appendix A

Glossary

Term	Definition
ANNPSR	Australian Naval Nuclear Power Safety Regulator
ANSTO	Australian Nuclear Science & Technology Organisation
ARPANSA	Australian Radiation Protection and Nuclear Safety Agency
ARWA	Australian Radioactive Waste Agency
ASA	Australian Submarine Agency
ASNO	Australian Safeguards and Non-Proliferation Office
ANNPA, AUKUS	Agreement among the Government of Australia, the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and the Government of the United States of America for Cooperation Related to Naval Nuclear Propulsion
CSIRO	Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation
Decommissioning	Administrative and technical actions taken to allow the removal of some or all regulatory controls from a facility.
DGD	Deep geological disposal
Disposal	The holding of radioactive sources, radioactive material, spent fuel or radioactive waste in a facility that provides for its containment without the intention of retrieval.
HLW	High level waste. Radioactive waste with the highest levels of radioactivity. Disposal in deep, stable geological formations usually several hundred metres below the surface.
IAEA	International Atomic Energy Agency
ILW	Intermediate level waste. Radioactive waste which usually contains larger amounts of radionuclides and generally needs purpose-built containers that provide shielding during transport or storage.
LLW	Low level waste. Radioactive waste which emits radiation at levels which generally require minimal shielding during handling,

	transport and storage, and is generally packed in steel drums for storage.
NORM	Naturally occurring radioactive material (waste)
NSD	Near surface disposal
Nuclear materials	Nuclear materials are uranium, plutonium and thorium. Some radioactive wastes may contain nuclear material. Nuclear materials and associated items (such as nuclear facility equipment) are regulated by ASNO for nuclear security and safeguards purposes.
OPAL	Open Water Australian Lightwater reactor, ANSTO
Radioactive waste	Material that has no foreseeable use and contains radioactive materials with activities or activity concentrations at levels where regulatory oversight is needed to ensure safety.
Radioactive waste management	All administrative and operational activities involved in the handling, pretreatment, treatment, conditioning, transport, storage and disposal of radioactive waste.
Storage	The holding of radioactive sources, radioactive material, spent fuel or radioactive waste in a facility that provides for their/its containment, with the intention of retrieval.
Waste	Material that has no foreseeable use.

Appendix B

Commonwealth legislation governing radioactive waste management

Title	Abbreviation	Description
Nuclear Non-Proliferation (Safeguards) Act 1987	Safeguards Act	ASNO has a dual role as Australia's regulator for nuclear security and safeguards, and as national authority for supporting IAEA safeguards verification activities. This includes supporting international safeguards inspections in Australia. ASNO's work is underpinned by the Safeguards Act which gives effect to Australia's international obligations under the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons and other international treaties, including Australia's safeguards agreements with the IAEA. Under the Safeguards Act, ASNO uses a system of permits for the effective regulation of all nuclear material, associated items and facilities. Penalties may be imposed for non-compliance.
Australian Radiation Protection and Nuclear Safety Act 1998	ARPANS Act	The ARPANS Act aims to protect the health and safety of Australian people and its environment from harmful radiation. ARPANSA is the Commonwealth regulator for radiation protection and nuclear safety. ARPANSA implements and enforces the Act through various regulatory activities. It also ensures Australia's compliance with IAEA safety standards and other international agreements, promoting radiation protection and nuclear safety.
Australian Nuclear Science and Technology Organisation Act 1987	ANSTO Act	The ANSTO Act details ANSTO's functions, powers, Board, Chief Executive Officer's duties, staffing, finance and other roles and responsibilities.
National Radioactive Waste Management Act 2012	NRWM Act	The NRWM Act seeks to ensure the safe and secure management of radioactive waste in Australia. It provides for a site selection, establishment and operation of a radioactive waste management facility. The Act also

		incorporates Australia's international obligations under the Joint Convention, upholding international safety standards for safe radioactive waste management.
Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999	EPBC Act	The EPBC Act is Australia's national environmental law. It provides a legal framework to protect and manage environmental matters of national importance and significance. It promotes ecologically sustainable development and biodiversity conservation through regulatory and compliance activities. It also implements Australia's international environmental responsibilities. The NRWM Act is subject to the EPBC Act and offences, and civil penalties may be imposed for non-compliance.
Australian Naval Nuclear Power Safety Act 2024	ANNPS Act	The ANNPS Act established a new regulatory framework for the nuclear safety of Australian naval nuclear power activities. This includes the construction, operation and maintenance of nuclear-powered submarines in Australia. The Act created the Australian Naval Nuclear Power Safety Regulator to promote, monitor and enforce compliance with the ANNPS Act.

Appendix C

International treaties and agreements relevant to radioactive waste management for Australia

Title	Abbreviation	Description
Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons	Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)	The NPT, established in 1970 and extended indefinitely in 1995, aims to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons, promote peaceful nuclear energy use, and achieve disarmament. The treaty requires the application of IAEA safeguards to uphold its objectives. Australia, as a founding IAEA member, remains committed to the NPT by refraining from acquiring, or developing nuclear weapons.
Convention on the Physical Protection of Nuclear Material (and its 2005 amendment)	Physical Protection Convention (CPPNM)	Established in 1979, the CPPNM came into force in 1987 and establishes legal obligations for Parties regarding the physical protection of nuclear material for peaceful purposes, including the criminalisation of certain offences. The 2005 amendment extended its scope to cover the physical protection of nuclear facilities and materials for peaceful purposes in domestic use, storage and transport. Australia's compliance with the CPPNM, ensures that domestic nuclear materials (including in the form of radioactive waste) and facilities are managed subject to these international standards.
Joint Convention on the Safety of Spent Fuel Management and on the Safety of Radioactive Waste Management	Joint Convention	The Joint Convention was set up in 1997 and took effect in 2001, as the first legal instrument to globally address spent fuel and radioactive waste management safety. The Convention establishes safety principles that apply to spent fuel and radioactive waste resulting from nuclear reactors, and, in certain cases (e.g. when relevant materials are permanently transferred to and managed within exclusively civilian programs), military, or defence programs. It also applies to planned and controlled

		releases of liquid or gaseous radioactive materials from regulated nuclear facilities. As a signatory to the Convention, Australia must implement and maintain a legislative and regulatory framework for the safe management of radioactive waste to protect people and the environment.
Agreement between Australia and the International Atomic Energy Agency for the application of safeguards in connection with the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons	Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement (CSA)	The CSA is a legally binding agreement between the IAEA and a non-nuclear weapon State, to verify the State's NPT commitments are met, to not use nuclear material and facilities for nuclear weapons purposes. Under the CSA safeguards, Australia must keep records and control all nuclear material and facilities, while regularly declaring and reporting such activities to the IAEA. The IAEA conducts inspections multiple times a year to verify Australia's declarations on nuclear material inventory and facility design features.
Protocol Additional to the Agreement between Australia and the International Atomic Energy Agency for the application of safeguards in connection with the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons	Additional Protocol	Supplementing the CSA, the Additional Protocol agreement strengthens the IAEA's safeguard system, when verifying States' declarations and reports on nuclear material and activities. The Additional Protocol allows the IAEA broader access rights to Australia's information on nuclear-related locations and activities and physical access to verify the absence of undeclared nuclear material or activities anywhere in Australia.
International Code for Safe Carriage of Packaged Irradiated Nuclear Fuel, Plutonium, and High-Level Radioactive Wastes on Board Ships (INF Code), Resolution MSC 88(71)	Irradiated Nuclear Fuel (INF) Code	The INF Code is an international regulation establishing a comprehensive safety standard for the transport of highly radioactive materials by sea established by the International Maritime Organisation.

International Convention on the Prevention of Marine Pollution by Dumping of Wastes and Other Matter [1985] ATS 16	The London Convention	The London Convention aims to protect the marine environment from pollution through the regulation and prohibition of deliberate disposal of wastes and matters from manufactured structures at sea.
United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples	UNDRIP	The UNDRIP is an international human rights instrument that aims to establish a framework of minimum standards for the survival dignity, well-being and rights of indigenous peoples.
Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and their Disposal	Basel Convention	The Basel Convention is an international treaty to safeguard human health and the environment from the generation, transboundary movement and disposal of hazardous wastes.
South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty	SPNFZ	SPNFZ is an international treaty to keep the South Pacific region free of environmental pollution from nuclear explosive devices and from dumping radioactive wastes and other radioactive matter at sea. Commonly referred to as the 'Treaty of Rarotonga'.
Agreement Among the Government of Australia, the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and the Government of the United States of America for Cooperation Related to Naval Nuclear Propulsion	ANNPA	Established in 2024, the ANNPA enables the transfer of naval nuclear propulsion information, equipment and material from the US and UK to Australia. Of relevance to the management of nuclear waste, the ANNPA specifies Australia: will be responsible for managing all waste generated as part of its nuclear-powered submarine program; will not reprocess any spent nuclear fuel from its submarines or for use in naval nuclear propulsion; and will establish and maintain a system of accounting for and control of all Material transferred for, used in, or generated by its nuclear-powered submarine program.
Nuclear Powered-Submarine Partnership and Collaboration Agreement between	Geelong Treaty	Established in 2025, the Geelong Treaty reinforces Australia and the UK's obligations to manage, store, operate, use, transport and dispose of any Nuclear Equipment or

Australia and the United Kingdom	Material in line with their respective international and domestic obligations, including non-proliferation obligations. It further codifies that Australia will not manage, store or dispose of any spent nuclear fuel from United Kingdom SSNs.