

AELB says island option 'most expensive' for Lynas waste
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By Shannon Teoh

KUALA LUMPUR, Jan 27 — Local regulators said today disposing of radioactive waste on an uninhabited island would be the most expensive option for Lynas Corp if the Australian miner's plans to reprocess residue from its RM2.5 billion rare earth plant in Kuantan fails.

The Atomic Energy Licensing Board (AELB) confirmed that Lynas' application for a pre-operating licence had mentioned "site options for location of the permanent disposal facility (PDF) may include under-utilised underdeveloped land, former abandoned mining land or an uninhabited island."

"But this will be the most expensive option as it will incur extra transport cost and even the barge to move the waste will come under regulatory requirements," AELB director-general Raja Datuk Abdul Aziz Raja Adnan (picture) told The Malaysian Insider.

Kuantan MP Fuziah Salleh had said Lynas plans to dump the waste on an uninhabited island off the coast of Pahang in her submission to AELB after public viewing of Lynas' waste management plan ended yesterday.

The PKR vice-president, who has led protests by environmentalists and local residents against the plant due to fears of radiation pollution, said locating the PDF on an island raised the risk of radioactive materials leaching into the sea.

But Raja Abdul Aziz said no site has been identified as "the need for a PDF will only be determined at the next stage."

"The waste management plan gives a best and worst-case scenario. A PDF will only be needed if its plans to process its waste into commercial products fail," he said.

Local residents and environmentalists have criticised Lynas for not having a clear long-term solution for disposing of radioactive waste and claimed the company would store it onsite, which is about 2km from the nearest residential area.

But Lynas has said a PDF for radioactive waste from its controversial rare earth plant will only be needed in a "worst-case scenario" where it is unable to reprocess its waste into commercial products.

According to Lynas, refining rare earth ore from Mount Weld, West Australia will result in three forms of residue, two of which have a radiation level of below 1 Becquerel per gramme (Bq/g) which is considered non-radioactive and outside of regulatory control by both international and local authorities.

It plans to recycle these two wastes into synthetic gypsum and fertiliser although the process has not been finalised.

However, its water leach purification (WLP) residue is projected to have a radiation level of 6 Bq/g, regarded as "very low-level" radioactive waste.

But Lynas, which received an additional funding boost of RM700 million this week through the sale of bonds, says it is "very confident" it can dilute the WLP to below 1 Bq/g to be used as a base in road building.

Putrajaya bowed to public pressure in April after sustained opposition from local residents and environmentalists due to fears of radiation pollution and put the project on ice pending a review by international experts.

In July, the government agency adopted 11 recommendations set out by the review and said it would not allow Lynas to begin operations or import rare earth ore until all conditions, which include a comprehensive, long-term and detailed plan for managing radioactive waste, are met.

According to Lynas, the AELB will meet on January 30 to decide on whether to issue a pre-operating licence which will be followed by a full licence within two years if the plant meets safety requirements outlined in its application.

Lynas is anticipating a windfall of RM8 billion a year from 2013 onwards from the manufacture of rare earth metals that are crucial to the manufacture of high-technology products such as smartphones, hybrid cars and bombs.

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