

Parliament adopts Lynas panel findings despite radioactive waste poser
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By Shannon Teoh

KUALA LUMPUR, June 19 — Parliament tonight approved a select committee's recommendations on the controversial Lynas rare earth plant that include handing the Australian miner its long-delayed temporary operating licence (TOL) despite continued questions over disposal of potentially radioactive waste.

Opposition lawmakers quizzed panel chief Datuk Seri Khaled Nordin over the Sydney-based firm's commitment to ship out waste if it fails to meet local radiation standards, saying it would also not meet regulations at its source in Western Australia.

"If it breaches our standards, then it will breach Australian standards as well. So what will happen then?" PKR vice president Chua Tian Chang asked during a debate on the panel report.

This forced Khaled to admit that "Western Australia will only accept non-radioactive residue and it would not be possible to get a full commitment to receive the waste."

He instead pointed out that Lynas, whose RM2.5 billion rare earth refinery in Kuantan has ignited fears of radiation pollution among residents there, had given a written undertaking to ship out any radioactive waste and added he was "confident they will honour it."

The higher education minister earlier explained that if Lynas's plans to recycle waste it said has "very low level radiation" failed, it would have to store the residue in a permanent disposal facility at a site to be finalised within 10 months of being issued the TOL.

The Pasir Gudang MP added that the company has also deposited a US\$50 million (RM160 million) financial surety to cover any eventuality.

He also said Lynas will be forced to cease operations if it failed to keep to radiological and environmental projections proposed in its TOL application or if the level of radiation to the general public exceeded the safe limit of 1 milliSievert per year.

Lynas cleared what may be its final hurdle to getting its TOL after the parliamentary select committee (PSC) called for the licence to be issued as "scientific facts" show that the controversial Kuantan plant is safe.

The positive feedback tabled in the PSC report came just four days after the Science, Technology and Innovation Ministry (Mosti) dismissed an appeal against the Australian miner's plant by residents living nearby and instead imposed two conditions that Lynas said it will have no problems satisfying.

The firm said in an immediate response that the findings were "yet another affirmation of the science behind" its plant and "the safety features built into it."

"We look forward to the issuance of the temporary operating licence so we can demonstrate that safety to the Malaysian community," Lynas said in a statement sent to The Malaysian Insider.

The Sydney-based firm also told The Malaysian Insider it will submit proposals today to meet the new terms.

However, residents who filed the appeal to Mosti have said they will challenge the minister's decision in court, calling the conditions "flimsy" and "not specific enough and will in no way safeguard or appease the fears of residents living in the area." The parliamentary committee on Lynas was approved in the Dewan Rakyat in March amid opposition furore over the alleged lack of terms of reference and suspicion that the nine-man panel would be used to "whitewash" the issue.

Pakatan Rakyat lawmakers also questioned the point of the select committee given that Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak had already said the government will not be bound by the panel's findings.

Lynas had said last month that it was on track to start up its rare earth plant in Malaysia within weeks after Khaled called it "the safest rare earth plant in the world."

It also said in April that delays in obtaining the licence for its facility, which was initially approved in January, may have "very serious consequences" for the RM80 billion worth of rare earth orders already received as it is "sold out for the next 10 years."

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