

Uranium mining ready to expand

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THE Howard Government has foreshadowed a dramatic expansion of Australia's uranium mining industry, identifying Indonesia, Thailand and Vietnam as future export markets as South East Asia becomes a player in nuclear energy.

Linking the nation's uranium exports to international strategies to combat global warming, the Foreign Affairs Minister Alexander Downer has revealed politically contentious plans to boost Australia's uranium exports.

Any sales would have to meet rules that the radioactive material only be used for civilian projects under the gaze of the international atomic energy watchdog and could not be re-exported.

"Indonesia, Thailand and Vietnam are also considering the possibility of nuclear power. These countries could become markets for Australian uranium, provided bilateral safeguards agreements were concluded with them," he says.

The Foreign Minister has used a submission to a parliamentary inquiry into the strategic importance of uranium resources to confirm Australia remains committed to exporting uranium to China.

Any exports would be under a safeguards agreement, and to give strong and unqualified endorsement to nuclear energy as a legitimate tool to lower greenhouse gas emissions.

"Nuclear energy can be expected to have an important place in meeting future energy needs over the next few decades," Mr Downer says.

"From this, it is apparent that Australia's uranium holdings are an internationally strategic resource which can only grow in significance.

"Since the whole world stands to benefit from the important issue of global warming, including through policies which give a significant place to nuclear energy, then development of this strategic resource is clearly consistent with our national and international interests."

Mr Downer's submission puts no caveats on the idea of developing a nuclear power industry in Australia. But last night, Mr Downer's office denied that his comments represented broad-ranging endorsement for a nuclear power industry for Australia.

"His comments were expressed in the context of developments in the global industry," Mr Downer's spokesman said.

Mr Downer's strong endorsement of expanding the uranium sector in Australia backs other bullish comments in recent times from the Industry Minister Ian Macfarlane and the Finance Minister Nick Minchin.

Labor is also shifting ground on the issue of uranium mining, with pressure from the South Australian Government to scrap the 20-year-old three-mines policy which restricts uranium production to only three sites.

Labor's leader Kim Beazley and resources spokesman Martin Ferguson have endorsed the Government's plans to export uranium to China.

The mining sector is using the current parliamentary inquiry to run a strong campaign to scrap the state bans on uranium mining and to create a nationally consistent framework to allow Australia to chase high world prices.

The Australian Nuclear Science and Technology Organisation, which runs Australia's only nuclear reactor, has also told the inquiry that exporting uranium helps deal with global warming.

"Because nuclear power emits virtually no greenhouse gases, Australia's uranium exports reduce global greenhouse gas emissions at the present time," ANSTO says.

"Further development and export of uranium will prevent additional emissions of greenhouse gases if used in new nuclear plants," it says.