

Australia, India uranium agreement will take time: advocate

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According to anti-nuclear campaigners, Australia's uranium industry is a minnow - they say milk and cream generate nearly twice as much export revenue as uranium.

Australia, India uranium agreement will take time: advocate (Credit: ABC)

The Australian Conservation Foundation says that the nation's uranium industry has promised much for decades, but delivered very little.

Against that backdrop, industry delegates are meeting in Adelaide today for that state's Mining and Energy Conference. It follows a major uranium conference held yesterday - a conference which has halved in numbers from last year, a fact some organisers attribute to the Fukushima disaster in Japan.

One of those in attendance yesterday, and back again today, is Rakesh Ahuja. He's formerly Australia's Deputy High Commissioner to India, now head of Axiom India Consultancy Group.

He says the industry's tiny contribution - less than 1 per cent - is due to policy.

Presenter: Richard Ewart

Speaker: Rakesh Ahuja, formerly Australia's Deputy High Commissioner to India, and currently head of Axiom India Consultancy Group

AHUJA: But the simple fact is that Australia holds up to or rather over 40 per cent of low cost uranium, so if we export it then the percentage would rise.

EWART: So what then are the chances of the much talked about deal between Australia and India, bearing in mind all the obstacles that potentially stand in the way, not least India's not yet being a signatory to the Nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty?

AHUJA: I think Richard the NPT issue is a bit of a fudgy now, we are now in a different ballgame after the United States and other western powers agreed that India has a place as a nuclear player in the world around the globe. The fact is that there are two obstacles there; one is we have to have a safeguards agreement with India, that is absolutely essential to ensure that it's purely for our uranium, is used purely for civilian purposes, that's one. The second is that these are complex issues involved and all this is and for one thing for example before we can sell uranium to India we have to make sure that we do not contravene any other treaties to which Australia is a party.

EWART: So your belief is that a deal which is satisfactory on both sides as it were could be signed quite soon now?

AHUJA: No as I said Richard I think it will take time, this safeguards agreement is a very complex issue, it will take time. Let me give you an example, Canada and India agreed to move forward back in 2010, and it was not until just earlier this year that they have reached what they call the

appropriate arrangements agreement, which now allows Canada to sell. So it's two and a half years negotiations took place there.

EWART: Now in terms of where the Australian uranium industry as a whole might be going; on the one hand we've seen the state of Queensland lifting a ban on uranium mining, in Western Australia approval has been given for mining at Wiluna, so those two states are moving forward in terms of what they might do with the uranium industry. Can you see that spreading to the rest of the country, will other states be getting on board do you think?

AHUJA: Well Richard I am sitting here in Adelaide and South Australia controls 80 per cent or possesses 80 per cent of uranium reserves of Australia. And South Australia's also just published an engagement, it's called South Australia-India engagement strategy, and it has identified uranium as a major economic opportunity in India.

EWART: Although development in South Australia hasn't perhaps moved as smoothly as state governments would have wished in the last few years?

AHUJA: I really don't know what you're referring to, but I can only go on what I have been told here that given the strategy, given this objective, there is really no impediment apart from obvious safeguards agreements and so on.

EWART: What do you then think of the suggestion that was put to us on the program yesterday by Dr Jim Green at the Australian Conservation Foundation that there should be in his view an independent investigation into the uranium industry, a national and independent inquiry is what he's calling for?

AHUJA: Well Richard I mean we can hold inquiries for years, think about last 50 years and all the debate that has gone into this issue. I do not see that there is much purpose to be served by yet another inquiry on an issue that has been debated widely and rightly in Australia for the last 60 years.

EWART: So it's your belief that the uranium industry in Australia has a decent future ahead of it?

AHUJA: I think it has got a superb future.