

Uranium contamination spreads

26 March 2004

The Ranger uranium mine remains closed following the discovery overnight that some 150,000 litres of water contaminated with uranium levels estimated at 108 parts per billion (five times the Australian drinking water standard) spilled from the Jabiru East water supply off the mine site. This incident has exposed the surrounding environment, the drinking water of businesses based at Jabiru East and downstream Aboriginal communities to an unprecedented threat.

Jabiru East lies some 3 kilometres from the Ranger mine site operated by Energy Resources of Australia (ERA) and is the location of the Jabiru Airport and related facilities, and the offices of the Environmental Research Institute of the Supervising Scientist.

The event is related to an incident at Ranger 48 hours ago when mine workers were exposed to water contaminated with 8,000 parts per billion uranium (400 times the drinking water standard) in their drinking water supply. It is believed the contamination occurred after mine process water was allowed to mix with the potable water supply due to an incorrect connection of pipes.

Executive Officer of Gundjeihmi Aboriginal Corporation, Mr Andy Ralph, said that at a minimum these events have breached the environmental requirements that ERA is obliged to meet. He stressed that the Mirarr People are, however, more concerned for people and country.

"The Mirarr Traditional Owners are fearful of people getting injured or sick on their country, they feel sorry for the mine workers who may have been exposed and are angry at the patently inadequate management of Ranger's process water."

"Along with Northern Territory and Commonwealth regulators, the company is responsible for protecting the environment and people. This incident has potentially put at risk not only the ecosystems of Kakadu's waterways, but also the health of the Aboriginal people who live and hunt nearby, as well as employees based at Jabiru East and tourists passing through the airport," Mr Ralph said.

"It appears that this incident is not simply a matter of human error but that there is an endemic problem with the management of process and potable water at Ranger. At present no one can rule out that the events which led to this contamination have not taken place before."

Mr Ralph said that while these latest incidents have tested relations between the Mirarr and ERA, the Traditional Owners remain keen to work closely with the company to progress environmental and social issues relating to the October 2003 Senate inquiry."

"The Senate inquiry's findings have been largely ignored to date, this incident highlights the need for the concerns of the Mirarr to be seriously considered and factored into the day-to-day operations at Ranger. We look forward to the cooperation of the mining company and the government regulators in the implementation of the inquiry's recommendations."

"In the interim Gundjeihmi awaits a full and public report on the incidents, along with recommendations to prevent a recurrence of this serious contamination."