



"The Marathon mess has put miners on notice"

SA WON'T BE TAKEN FOR A MUG, SAYS MIKE SMITHSON

THERE was more than a whiff of corporate smelliness in the far north of the state as uranium explorer Marathon Resources was caught with its pants down.

The State Government and Primary Industries officials rightly demanded a please explain after hundreds of plastic bags of waste were unearthed just below the precious red dirt at Mount Gee near Arkaroola.

While it seems fair and reasonable to presume the explorer, which is also a large investor in this state, is innocent until proven guilty, it also raises serious questions that must be answered.

Just because the Government is hell-bent on surging forward with mining opportunities, it doesn't mean that those granted licences can bite the hand that feeds them.

Had it not been for the vigilance of the fiercely environmentally-conscious Sprigg family, which owns Arkaroola, the buried bags may never have seen the light of day.

When the Attorney-General was made aware of the discarded soil samples and other trash, including disposable protective clothing, gloves and old plastic lunch boxes, he was none too pleased.

It's rumoured there may be thousands, rather than hundreds, of plastic bags buried there, but Michael Atkinson had to be careful in language he used. Even his media release, detailing the pending investigation, was limited to five sentences, giving the impression that he didn't want to be drawn into making adverse comment about the company.

He promised that PIRSA and the Environment Protection Authority would both seek an explanation from Marathon Resources over the alleged littering breach. The company was

just as brief in its initial response, claiming it had launched an internal investigation.

"Marathon has comprehensive records and photographs of all processes undertaken. If authorities request that further work be done, our records enable us to do it, and we will," the company's media statement said.

The Government knew that any broad condemnation would have fallen straight into the hands of environmental dogooders who would rightly claim "we told you so".

If Marathon Resources has deliberately and recklessly trashed the desert sand up north, it deserves to be fined heavily as a warning to others.

No South Australian wants to be taken for a mug at the hands of the mining sector.

These companies may be providing royalty wealth to the state as well as jobs, but they have no right to stray even a millimetre outside the law.

The Attorney-General tried to

be diplomatic in dealing with the issue.

He was probably much keener to see it go away without too much collateral damage.

No-one is suggesting the discarded bags contained a radioactive substance that posed a danger to the public, but there's a more important principle. This state is doing these explorers much more of a favour than they're doing us.

Once the minerals have been extracted they're gone forever with the entrepreneurs pocketing tens of millions of dollars. But for those who strongly oppose such activity, it could be seen as selling the family silverware.

That's not to mention the impact on one of the state's most pristine outback wilderness areas.

Of course, the Spriggs and other environmental observers will now be watching all exploration companies like hawks.

If there is any good to come out of the Marathon mess, it's

put the queue of companies waiting to dig up the Outback on notice.

It became clear this week that some people living and working in the far-flung area don't want to be labelled environmental vandals. So, therefore, it would be fair to assume that one of these concerned people blew the whistle to the Spriggs in the first place.

Presuming that Marathon Resources has a case to answer, the book - in fact the whole library - should be thrown at them even though it could be declared only a minor breach.

There's a growing feeling and concern that what's brewing in our mineral-rich Outback is out of sight and therefore out of mind.

We're not talking about small plots going under the spade.

The Mount Gee project will have an operational footprint between 40 and 125 hectares and is expected to produce 900 tonnes of uranium oxide annually. It will also drain up to 2.5 gigalitres of water from the Great Artesian Basin annually.

All of this in a week that the Government has announced another world-scale uranium mine starting work next year.

There's a touch of irony that the new digging and exploration will also be in the shadows of the Flinders Ranges near Arkaroola.

Let's just hope our new tag of being the yellowcake capital of the world, with four of the nation's five uranium mines, won't come back to bite us.

Any more slip-ups or breaches should make us all highly suspicious of what really is going on over the northern horizon.

The State Government mustn't be so placid and understanding next time around.

NOT-SO-PREMIER EVENT

THE gloves are already coming off before the new parliamentary year has even started.

The Opposition dragged an obscure issue out of the drawer looking to land a punch on Mike Rann's pulling-power with international dignitaries.

They claim a major Adelaide conference, second only to the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, will be a complete fizzer because there's only been one RSVP.

It was hoped 14 Canadian premiers would meet up in March with eight Australian counterparts to forge a new

brand of co-operation between the two countries.

The problem is only one visitor has accepted and it seems a large part of his time here will be enjoying the Clipsal V8 event.

And speaking of people enjoying themselves, Kevin Foley landed the tough gig this week - not!

He's partaking in travel, food, wine and film festivals in Los Angeles as part of G'Day USA.

No doubt he'll catch up with his old water skiing mate, now Australian Consul-General in New York and G'Day USA founder John Olsen.