

Monday, 7 May 2012

### China expert: Lynas' waste recycle proposal outdated

Although Lynas had given an assurance that the radioactive waste from its rare earth refinery in Gebeng will be recycled into non-hazardous commercial products, a prominent chemist from China commented that it is an outdated method abandoned by China.

Chun-Hua Yan, who is Cheung Kong professor of the College of Chemistry and Molecular Engineering, part of Peking University, said that recycling radioactive waste from a rare earth plant into gypsum, fertiliser and material for road construction, was the method adopted by China rare-earth plants in the early days.

"I'm not an expert in this field but I believe that was the road travelled by China before but not now," he told the media after attending an international symposium on rare earth today in Kuala Lumpur.

Yan claimed that radioactive leakage is not the most hazardous risk of a rare earth plant because if the operator is willing to inject huge funds to bury the waste far from habitation and seismic areas, as well as isolated from groundwater and sealed, it would not be a problem.

"It can be done from the technological perspective but the key lies in your investment, cost and management, whether you are committed in addressing it," he stressed.

Generally the most pressing problem for a rare earth plant, said Yan, is to deal with the fluorine gas produced during the fusion process.

Earlier, a researcher from the Atomic Energy Licensing Board (AELB) reiterated that the controversial Asian Rare Earth (ARE) plant in Bukit Merah was shut down in 1994 due to commercial consideration and not to public health concerns.

Presenting his paper entitled 'The Asian Rare Earth Experience and Related Research Activities by Nuclear Malaysia', Meor Yusoff Meor Sulaiman (*right*) claimed that Mitsubishi Chemicals chose to close the plant on Jan 14, 1994, because the market price of rare earth was way below its production cost of US\$4.25 per kg.

The plant failed to compete in the international market when the market price of light rare-earth chloride dropped to US\$2.60 in 1996.



### Developing a rare-earth course at UMP

Speaking at a press conference later, the former Science Academy of Malaysia (ASM) vice-

president Ahmad Zaidee Laidin said that the academy is planning to develop a rare-earth related course at Universiti Malaysia Pahang (UMP).

He said that ASM is currently preparing a memorandum of agreement to sign with the Chinese Rare Earth Society (CRES) to develop the curriculum.

On top of that, he also said that the university can become the third-party monitoring unit for Lynas' rare-earth plant, which is similar with the situation in Germany where the nuclear plants are monitored by non-governmental organisations.

“(We are) trying to work with UMP to provide that kind of monitoring service using the latest equipment they have and working with China’s Peking University as well in order to develop the know-how, the understanding.

“This is something we have been working on and it’s a work in progress,” said Ahmad Zaidee.

The chairperson of the Unesco International Science, Technology and Innovation Centre for South-South Cooperation (ISTIC) Lee Yee Cheong, who also a speaker, said that the academy wanted to see UMP come up with a rare-earth research and development facility.

“But UMP is only the hub, we are having a consortium of universities with rare-earth expertise to pool their resources, and we are asking China to help us to develop the curriculum for the research and development and also to train mining engineers and technicians.”

The foreign rare-earth experts who attended today’s symposium also urged Lynas to enhance its transparency and public engagement.

“The first thing you are going to do is to tell everybody what are you going to do,” said Jack Lifton, the founding principal of the US-based Technology Metals Research.