

## Call to clean-up Emu Field Atomic Test Site 70 years after the Black Mist

Briefer by Independent Environment Campaigner David Noonan 12 Sept 2023

[Emu Field](#) was the site of the first British Atomic Bomb Test on mainland Australia in October 1953.

Called [Operation Totem](#) two plutonium A-Bombs were blasted off at Emu Field at 7 AM on 15<sup>th</sup> & on 27<sup>th</sup> Oct from 30 m high towers, raising bulk contaminated material into atomic mushroom clouds.

In '[This black smoke rolling through the mulga: it's time to remember the atomic tests at Emu Field](#)' (The Conversation 04/05/22) Assoc Prof Elizabeth Tynan has stated: "**Abrogating responsibility:** Britain explicitly abrogated all responsibility for those who lived near the Emu Fields site. Britain maintained through to the royal commission – and in years beyond – that it was not responsible for Aboriginal welfare in the face of atomic weapons tests."

*"The first test, Totem I, produced a mysterious, greasy "black mist" that rolled over Aboriginal communities around Wallatinna and Mintabie, 170 km to the northeast of Emu Field. The black mist directly harmed Anangu people. Because no data was collected at the time, it is impossible to quantify precisely, however, the anecdotal evidence suggests death and sickness occurred."*

The book "[The Secret of Emu Field](#)" (2022) by Elizabeth Tynan realised a level of public scrutiny over 'Britain's forgotten Atomic Tests in Australia', however key responsibilities are yet to be addressed.

Prof Tynan states there has never been a proper clean up at Emu Field (p.275): "**Emu Field was left contaminated when the British departed. It has stayed that way, more or less, ever since.**"

Tynan reports (p.251) that just before the tests some staff were briefed that "the area will remain contaminated and radioactive for a period of perhaps up to forty years".

In Operation Brumby the British led a "cursory and inadequate clean-up of the Emu and Maralinga sites" (p.275-276). The resultant Pearce Report in 1968 "was notoriously wrong about the extent of radioactive contamination at all British atomic test sites" and "gave only cursory information about the contamination at Emu".

Brumby is reported as "a vain attempt to make the test sites look as though they had never been used for atomic testing. At Emu, the main activity was to gather up various kinds of debris and trinitite. The aim was to remove the bulk of the glazing and bury it and disperse the remainder".

"The radioactivity they left on the ground was not obvious to the casual observer." They graded and disc-ploughed the topsoil around the blast sites. **Buried and dispersed wastes remain at Emu.**

In addition to the two atomic blasts a series of toxic experiments misleadingly named 'minor trials' were conducted, four prior to the Totem 1 blast and one after, some 6.5 km from the Emu airstrip.

Codenamed the 'Kitten tests' these trials used beryllium and polonium-210 to test mechanisms to release intense sources of alpha particles and bursts of neutrons to trigger atomic bomb explosions.

Tynan states (p.85-86): "**The five Kittens experiments at Emu caused significant contaminations, both chemical and radioactive... The Kittens sites at Emu were never cleaned up.**"

There are now growing civil society [calls](#) for a proper clean-up of the Emu Field Atomic Test Site.

Emu Field was part of the [Woomera Prohibited Area](#), a region [reported](#) to now be targeted as a 'favoured location' for an AUKUS nuclear dump - including weapons grade Atomic-Bomb fuel.

## **ALP adopts policy on A-Bomb Tests to assist affected communities and remediate impacts:**

The Emu Field Atomic Test Site is covered by Ban Treaty Articles and by recent ALP policy updates to start to act in accordance with certain key Articles of the Treaty prior to Australia signing.

A “**Nuclear Disarmament Statement**” adopted into policy at ALP National Conference (18/08/2023) re-affirms a commitment to Sign the Ban Treaty and offers assistance over Atomic Tests. Extracts:

*2. Acknowledges the deep and ongoing consequences of nuclear testing in Australia, which have been borne disproportionately by our First Nations peoples, as well as testing in the Pacific. ...*

*5. Acknowledges the value of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (the Ban Treaty, TPNW) which came into force on 22 January 2021, and its aspiration to rid the world of nuclear weapons for all time; ...*

*9. d) Considering steps that can be taken with respect to further assistance for affected communities and further environmental remediation in relation to the British atomic tests that occurred on Australian territory, consistent with Article 6 of the Ban Treaty,*

*and considering further collaboration and assistance to Pacific Island communities affected by nuclear testing in the Pacific, consistent with Article 7 “International cooperation and assistance” of the Ban Treaty.*

Federal ALP member for Fremantle Josh Wilson MP moved this updated Labor policy, saying:

*“this demonstrates that Labor values the TPNW and takes it seriously as a new and promising form of international agreement that seeks to shift the otherwise dangerous status quo on nuclear weapons.”*

This ALP policy invokes the [Ban Treaty Article 6 Victim assistance and environmental remediation](#):

*1. Each State Party shall, with respect to individuals under its jurisdiction who are affected by the use or testing of nuclear weapons, in accordance with applicable international humanitarian and human rights law, adequately provide age- and gender-sensitive assistance, without discrimination, including medical care, rehabilitation and psychological support, as well as provide for their social and economic inclusion.*

*2. Each State Party, with respect to areas under its jurisdiction or control contaminated as a result of activities related to the testing or use of nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices, shall take necessary and appropriate measures towards the environmental remediation of areas so contaminated.*

For decades the Emu Field Atomic Test Site has had only very limited formal recognition. From 1991 to 2006 it was [listed](#) under the prior Register of the National Estate, in the Class: Historic. However its current status is only as an ‘indicative place’ on the National Heritage List [database](#), as “a formal nomination has not been made and the Council has not received the data for assessment”.

Federal authorities should now instigate a long overdue clean-up of impacts at Emu Field and engage with civil society and the Anangu People of the region. **For further info see:** <https://icanw.org.au/>