

Premier Mike Rann announces permanent protection for Arkaroola

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The Arkaroola Wilderness Resort in the Flinders Ranges. Picture: Mark Brake *Source: The Advertiser*

CABINET agonised for more than a year over the fate of Arkaroola before Premier Mike Rann announced a permanent ban on mining in the sanctuary.

Yesterday, Mr Rann announced mineral exploration and future mining would be prohibited at Arkaroola in the northern Flinders Ranges through changes to the Mining Act, special legislation and national and World Heritage listing.

The decision follows months of deliberation and ends exploration company Marathon Resources' uranium mining ambitions for the area.

To achieve it, Mr Rann stared down opponents from both within and outside Government, including powerful Labor party figures, lobbyist John Quirke and Marathon director and former senator Chris Schacht.

While the move was slammed by the mining lobby yesterday as a "slap in the face", the Government has the public on its side, with a poll from February this year showing 72 per cent of South Australians, and 79 per cent of Labor voters, opposed mining in the sanctuary.

SA Chamber of Mines and Energy chief executive Jason Kuchel warned taxpayers could be liable for compensation in the "tens of millions of dollars."

Marathon Resources placed its shares in a trading halt after the announcement, saying it would take advice on its position before informing the market next week.

"We were not consulted at all about this decision," chairman Peter Williams said.

"Our Mt Gee uranium project - the fifth-largest undeveloped uranium resource in Australia - is our flagship project and we were ready to embark on a drilling program within weeks."

Environmental groups and owners of the sanctuary, Marg and Doug Sprigg, welcomed the news yesterday saying it was enormous relief after many years of uncertainty.

The Greens, who have previously tried to legislate protection for the sanctuary, and the Wilderness Society also hailed the decision.

"The new legislation will recognise the unique character of this iconic mountain wilderness and will not be able to be overturned by a future government," Wilderness Society campaign manager Peter Owen said.

The issue was brought to popular attention when, in 2008, Marathon Resources was caught dumping uranium drilling waste at the sanctuary in breach of its licence conditions.

Soon after last year's election, the Department for Environment and Heritage briefed Environment Minister Paul Caica on policy options for the sanctuary.

Cabinet considered the options last November, when sources say a decision was "virtually made", but it was only on Thursday that the Government approved it.

It comes more than 70 years after Sir Douglas Mawson urged his geology student Reg Sprigg in 1939 to do his utmost to preserve the park for future generations.

Mr Sprigg and his wife Griselda took over its management in 1968, and have since lobbied the Government for a mining ban - a cause taken up by their children and current custodians Doug and Marg.

"It is a shame that Mum and Dad aren't here to see it, but I am sure they would be thrilled," Ms Sprigg said.

"We are absolutely blown away, I still can't get the smile off my face. We were all in tears, it was really, really amazing."

Mining Minister Tom Koutsantonis said the Government was acting in the industry's best interest, and that approving Marathon's activities would have alienated those otherwise supportive of uranium mining.

"In their heart of hearts the mining industry knows this is the right decision," he said.

Mr Rann said the Government had proved it could be at the same time pro-mining and pro-environment.

"This area is very important for our state and our nation, it helps define us as a state ... and it is an area we want to protect forever."

Opposition leader Isobel Redmond said she supported the decision, but former leader Martin Hamilton-Smith said it sent mixed messages to the mining industry.