

Premier Rann flies to Arkaroola for mining announcement

- Sarah Martin
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Douglas and Marg Sprigg overlooking their home in the Flinders Ranges. Picture: Brooke Whatnall *Source: The Advertiser*

PREMIER Mike Rann and two senior ministers will fly to Arkaroola Wilderness Sanctuary today in a sign the Government is close to ending 40 years of debate over mining in the Flinders Ranges.

The Government confirmed yesterday that Mr Rann, Mineral Resources Development Minister Tom Koutsantonis and Environment Minister Paul Caica will travel to the site this morning. Mr Rann's office refused to say why the trio were going, but the Government has been working on plans to balance the competing desires of mining companies that want to exploit the region with environmentalists who want to protect it, for the past few years.

There are various options the Government could consider for managing the area, but Mr Rann's involvement would lend weight to the announcement being a positive one.

Earlier this year, sources revealed to The Advertiser that Mr Rann wanted to declare the sanctuary a national park with an announcement imminent.

But in February the Government chose to announce it would embark on another round of consultation, and was considering "all available options."

The sanctuary hosts a deposit owned by uranium explorer Marathon Resources, which was penalised after it was found to have illegally dumped drilling waste.

The move to ban mining has been fiercely resisted by proponents of Marathon, including a line-up of powerful political figures, including former Labor senator and Marathon director Chris Schacht, lobbyist and former senator John Quirke, and former deputy premier Graham Ingerson. Current Labor senator and party power-broker Don Farrell is also understood to support the uranium explorer.

The owners of the Arkaroola Wilderness Sanctuary, siblings Marg and Doug Sprigg, hope the visit indicates the Government will announce a ban on mining in the area.

The Sprigg family, who have been custodians of the eco-resort since 1968, say they are worried that the chances of protecting the sanctuary will diminish if and when Mr Rann resigns - widely expected before the next election.

Ms Sprigg said she hoped the Government would do what was right for the sanctuary.

"You don't have to mine everywhere - some places are special," she said. "We have got so much uranium in this state, why make a mess of something that is really special."

Ms Sprigg said she wanted the Government to announce special legislation for the sanctuary that would ban mining, and allow the sanctuary to continue its eco-tourism operations, including the renowned Ridgetop Tour.

"We believe special legislation will be the best option for Arkaroola," she said.

"We have been doing this and looking after the sanctuary for 43 years and we like to think it can go forward in the future in the same way." Ms Sprigg said it would be "wonderful" if the Government finally protected the area.

"It is ridiculous it has taken so long. The state hasn't got another Arkaroola, there is nothing like it in Australia. It is something precious that belongs to all South Australians, and anyone who comes here really values it."

A Cabinet submission on options for Arkaroola, presented to the Government last November, suggested that mining could be banned immediately using special legislation, a proposal advocated by Environment Minister Paul Caica as the "most effective and efficient approach".

The submission said special legislation was the easiest option for protecting the "conservation, landscape and tourism values of Arkaroola Wilderness Sanctuary", but it also discussed declaring the sanctuary a National Park with special conditions.

Placing Arkaroola on the National Heritage List was also discussed.

The Cabinet note also discusses the possibility of allowing continued exploration, but with higher restrictions, but says this option is "unlikely to satisfy" community concerns.