

Opening the submarine



AUSTRALIA'S PROGRAM TO upgrade submarine facilities in Western Australia presents a significant inflection point for local industry, particularly for small and medium enterprises (SME) positioning themselves to supply a future sovereign submarine capability. As AUKUS transforms HMAS Stirling on Garden Island and the Henderson precinct near Perth into gateways for nuclear-powered submarines, the question facing SMEs is straightforward: how can you retool, expand and invest so that business is ready when work packages arrive?

Two anchor projects underpin the broader infrastructure investment: HMAS Stirling is receiving funding to deliver 32 discrete projects – everything from underwater tunnel refurbishment to building renovations – intended to accommodate rotational visits by US and

ABOVE: Along with HMAS Stirling, the Henderson naval precinct will be a hive of infrastructure work and development to underpin Australia's move to nuclear-powered submarines.

UK submarines by 2027 and, ultimately, Australia's own US-sourced SSN fleet in the early 2030s. These works encompass dock utilities, power systems, environmental controls and security upgrades. Concurrently, the Henderson naval precinct has been allocated AUD\$127 million over 3 years to expand its dry dock, deepen access channels and upgrade



Ian Langford
The Langford Files

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

on-site facilities for submarine maintenance. Once complete, Henderson will be the principal depot-level maintenance hub for Australian nuclear-powered submarines.

While these headline figures are substantial, the vast majority of line item contracts remain not-yet-defined. For SMEs, the opportunity is clear: projects of this scale will require thousands of person-hours in metal fabrication, precision machining, electrical installation, civil construction, assembly and support services. But in practice, industry needs

gateway for industry

two essentials before acting: a) precise demand signals – the scope of work, volumes, technical standards, certifications and contract schedules and b) regulatory certainty – particularly regarding classification, security clearance requirements and nuclear-related protocols. Without that clarity, businesses cannot safely commit capital to purchase specialist machines, hire skilled staff or seek appropriate certifications.

Once tenders are released, SMEs across Western Australia should see work opportunities in four categories:

- 1. Structural and Civil Works**
- 2. Mechanical and Metal Fabrication**
- 3. Electrical, Instrumentation, Control Systems**
- 4. Support and Maintenance**

For SMEs to bid on these packages, early engagement is critical. Defence, through the Australian Submarine Agency (ASA), should conduct capability reviews now, identify gaps in equipment or personnel, and pursue pre-qualification processes with other key stakeholders, to include ASC. AUKUS industry days and ASA forums will be vital as they act as primary venues where scope, technical specifications and timelines are first shared.

Although Australia's domestic legislation prohibits any naval reactor fuel enrichment or reprocessing, there is a genuine industrial playbook in the broader nuclear-support ecosystem. SMEs should focus on:

- 1. Fuel Transport and Storage**
- 2. Waste Management Systems**
- 3. Mine-to-Market Pathways for Uranium**
- 4. Radiological Services and Consultancy**

However, the timeline for these nuclear-support contracts remains fluid. Until formal fuel-procurement agreements are signed with allied partners – and until the Australian Nuclear-Powered Submarine Safety Regulator (ANPSSR) publishes licensing procedures and safety codes – SMEs cannot definitively know the volume, technical thresholds or schedules for nuclear-related work. This underscores the urgent need for the Government to issue a clear road map.

In late 2023, Parliament established the ANPSSR to oversee licensing, compliance and enforcement of naval nuclear-power safety. By creating a standalone regulator, Canberra intends to streamline approvals; but in its first year, the ANPSSR must still publish regulations, safety codes and application processes. SMEs keen to pursue nuclear-support work need explicit deadlines and will need to know licensing windows now.

Parallel amendments to the Defence Trade Controls Act 2012 aim to simplify export controls around sensitive submarine technologies. While these changes should accelerate US/UK technology transfers and joint projects, they introduce new compliance obligations. Businesses must obtain Defence Export Permits for anything from advanced CNC machines to radiation-hardened alloys. Uncertainty around these export-control frameworks can deter SMEs from importing specialised tooling until they have confidence in approval lead times.

The establishment of the ASA has created a nodal point for procurement co-ordination and industry engagement. ASA's Western Australia office is tasked with issuing rolling forecasts of contract opportunities for sustainment and

infrastructure support over a 20-year horizon. Yet so far, these forecasts have been indicative rather than exclusive: they outline broad bands of spending but provide few firm dollar values or schedule milestones.

Despite some minor frustrations, however, the opportunity remains immense: depot-level sustainment of Australia's SSN fleet could, for example, sustain up to 10,000 high-skilled jobs in WA alone, and nuclear-support contracts will generate a secondary market for radiological services, waste management and secure logistics. But these opportunities hinge on the speed and clarity of information flowing from Canberra to industry. SMEs cannot wait until requests for proposals or tenders appear to start planning; they need the Government to detail the path ahead.

Western Australia's submarine facility upgrades offer a generational opportunity for SMEs to secure work in engineering, fabrication, electrical, civil works and nuclear support. Yet to capture these opportunities, businesses need more than optimistic projections and blanket statements. They need a clear, Government-issued roadmap that details contract timelines, technical standards and regulatory procedures.

As a defence industry audience, your window to position, invest and re-tool is now. Advocate for the transparency and guidance required so that when procurement begins in earnest, Australian businesses can deploy the right equipment, recruit the right talent and establish themselves as indispensable partners in the nation's sovereign submarine capability. **DTR**