

Forrest group Walk Free warns of slavery threat in Australia's solar panel supply chains

By Daniel Mercer and Nick Dole
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Uyghur detainees listen to a "de-radicalisation" speech at a re-education camp in Hotan. (Supplied: RFA)

A human rights group funded by mining magnate Andrew Forrest has warned of the rapidly rising risks of modern slavery and forced labour in the world's renewable energy supply chains.

Walk Free, an arm of Mr Forrest's Minderoo Foundation, will on Wednesday release a report outlining how Australia imports \$US17.4 billion [\$26 billion] of products that may have used coerced labour.

And it is warning that renewable energy products led by solar are increasingly susceptible to the risks, particularly those made in China.

The finding comes after concerns were raised in Federal Parliament about Australia's heavy reliance on imported Chinese solar panels allegedly made using forced labour from ethnic minorities.

Xinjiang, a province in China's north-west, is home to ethnic groups including the Uyghurs, who have reportedly been subject to persecution by authorities from Beijing.

[There have also been reports, including from Sheffield Hallam University last year](#), suggesting the widespread use of coerced Uyghur labour in camps to produce polysilicon — the key ingredient for solar panels.



Satellite imagery shows suspected factories built right next to a re-education facility in Hotan. (Google Earth)

Modern slavery in broad daylight

In its latest Global Slavery Index, released on Wednesday, Walk Free found solar panels were becoming enmeshed with "at-risk" supply chains that may use forced labour.

The foundation found that solar panels were one of the most valuable products to fall into the category, with imports deemed risky worth \$22 billion a year since 2018.

Of those, Australia's imports were worth \$2 billion a year.

Key points:

- Walk Free says 50 million people are living in modern slavery worldwide
- Australia imports \$26 billion a year of products that may have been made using forced labour
- Solar panels have become one of the goods most at risk of using modern slavery

Grace Forrest, the daughter of Mr Forrest and the founding director of Walk Free, said the problem of modern slavery, an umbrella term that included forced labour, forced marriage, human trafficking and debt bondage, was getting worse.

Ms Forrest said about 50 million people around the world were living in modern slavery, including as many as 40,000 in Australia, where she said they worked in industries such as agriculture and the care economy.

She said Australia was also a major importer of products that may have used modern slavery.

While electronics and garments were prone to the greatest levels of risk, Ms Forrest said solar panels were a growing area of concern.



Grace Forrest says the energy transition shouldn't come at the cost of human rights. (ABC News: Nick Dole)

"The risk with solar panels, as with many parts of the green economy, is the fact that they are transnational supply chains lacking severely in transparency and accountability," Ms Forrest said in London, where she was launching the report.

"The fact is that by default right now a green economy will be built on modern slavery.

"And we have an opportunity, and we argue, a very strong responsibility to step up and say you cannot harm people in the name of saving the planet."

Climate risks 'humanitarian too'

According to Walk Free, solar panels were among the five riskiest products for a swag of the world's biggest economies, including Australia, France, Germany, Japan and South Korea.

Almost 90 per cent of the global supply for polysilicon comes from China, with Walk Free noting that about half of that came from Xinjiang.

It also noted the United Nations had issued a "Just Transition" declaration in 2021 in a bid to better protect workers in the renewable energy industry around the world.

Despite this, Walk Free said "fewer than half the members" of the world's 20 biggest economies had so far signed up to the pledge.



Workers walk by the perimeter fence of what is officially known as a vocational skills education centre. (Reuters: Thomas Peter)

Ms Forrest said the onus was on governments including Australia's, which introduced the Modern Slavery Act in 2018, to drive change.

But she said consumers also had a responsibility.

"We don't want to dampen people's enthusiasm for a green future," she said.

"We know that the climate crisis is a real risk to Australians and people living throughout the world.

"All we're asking people to understand is that the climate crisis is also a humanitarian one and as we rapidly procure these products, we need governments to ensure there is genuine safety and protection so people at the front of supply chains."

In Senate budget estimates this week, officials from the Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water acknowledged concerns about the use of forced labour in Australia's solar supply chains.

Concerns raised in Parliament

Under questioning from Liberal Senator Hollie Hughes, the department suggested the risks bolstered the case for "having more diversity" in solar suppliers.

To illustrate the point, deputy secretary Simon Duggan cited the announcement at the weekend in which Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and US President Joe Biden vowed to "broaden supply chains, including clean energy technologies".

"At the moment, this department is not monitoring or tracking the proportion of solar panels that are coming from different overseas markets," Mr Duggan said.

"But it's an area of broad interest ... [with] very good economic reasons for having more diversity and supply of solar panels."

The Clean Energy Council, a lobby group representing renewable power developers, has backed calls for Australia to diversify its supply, including by bringing some manufacturing onshore.



Chinese authorities have cracked down on many aspects of Uyghur life. (AP: Han Guan)

Nick Aberle from the council said while human rights abuses were not "peculiar to solar", they were untenable and consumers, businesses and governments had a moral obligation to act.

"There are two key approaches to this," Dr Aberle said.

"One is around the visibility into the supply chains.

"So, if 50 per cent of the world's polysilicon is linked to modern slavery that means there's 50 per cent that isn't."

He said consumers who ensured the products they were buying weren't linked to modern slavery could help drive shifts within the industry.

"The other key part of this is also looking at how we can shift supply chains to other parts of the world, whether that's into Australia or whether that's into other countries where we can have greater visibility and transparency into that supply chain," he said.

Editor's note 05/06/2023: The ABC has updated this article to explicitly reflect the father-daughter relationship between Grace Forrest and Andrew Forrest.