

31 axed in UMTRA layoffs

Rudy Herndon Moab Sun News | Posted: Thursday, May 5, 2016 8:15 am

The contractor in charge of removing uranium mill tailings from the banks of the Colorado River thinks it can avoid prolonged delays in tailings shipments to Crescent Junction, but only at a high cost to the project's workforce.

On Tuesday, April 26, Portage, Inc., laid off 31 of the 113 crew members at the Moab Uranium Mill Tailings Remedial Action (UMTRA) Project site just north of town.

"(It was) not one of the more happy days on the project, and, you know, everyone on the team is a valuable asset, so everybody's feeling pretty bad about where we had to go to get in this direction," U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) Moab Project Director Don Metzler said.

Metzler said the previously announced cuts reflected the fact that the project team spent more money than it planned to this year to maintain its aging equipment and facilities. The project is also facing a proposed 10 percent budget cut in the coming federal fiscal year, although Moab UMTRA supporters say they're committed to lobbying the state and federal governments for more cleanup funds.

However, the outcome of those lobbying efforts remains a mystery at this point. Without any guarantees for additional funding, the project is reducing its weekly tailings shipments to its long-term disposal cell near Crescent Junction by half, from four to two trainloads.

If it didn't, Metzler said, the project would likely face a six- to eight-week curtailment of all shipments this summer, followed by a potential five-month curtailment in 2017.

"That just appeared to no one to be a smart way of doing business," Metzler said.

While the project's workers had several weeks to brace themselves for the looming cuts, they had no idea who would be laid off indefinitely until the morning of April 26, when they were notified one by one.

A longtime Moab resident who was, in the contractor's words, "involuntarily separated" from his job,



UMTRA Project

A reach-stacker lifts a container full of uranium mill tailings off the train at Crescent Junction and puts it on a truck to take to the long-term disposal cell. More than one-quarter of the Moab UMTRA Project's workforce was laid off on Tuesday, April 26. [Moab Sun News file photo]

said that little consideration was given to local employees – some of whom relocated to town, or bought houses here.

Instead, the man said those employees were let go, while out-of-town crew members who live as far away as Salt Lake City; Price; and Grand Junction, Colorado, held onto their jobs.

"One thing that really bothers me is that they kept the out-of-towners over the locals," said the man, who asked not to be identified.

Wendee Ryan, the project's contracted public affairs manager with S&K Aerospace, said that Portage was responsible for determining which employees were "involuntarily separated." The Idaho Falls, Idaho contractor based its decision on the mix of skills needed to perform work at the Moab and Crescent Junction sites, she said.

But the former Moab project worker said he doesn't believe that any of those out-of-town workers have special qualifications or skills that they can bring to the project.

"They didn't look at qualifications and safety records, because if they had, more Moab people would have stayed," he said.

Up until he first heard about the layoffs, the man said that he had no major complaints about his time on the job.

"Everything was good," he said. "Everybody got along."

However, once the word about the layoffs got out, the next three weeks or so were an uncomfortable time, he said, as some workers jockeyed against others with the hope that they could keep their jobs.

"It put a lot of pressure on everybody, and everybody was freaking out about it," he said.

Ryan said that all of Portage's employees were verbally notified on the morning of April 6 about the changes in the tailings shipment schedule and the "involuntary separations" that would take effect on April 26.

However, the former employee said he and some of his co-workers only found out about the potential budget cuts and layoffs after they read local media reports about the UMTRA project.

"One of the workers brought in a paper and said, 'What the hell is all this?'" he said.

Now that he's out of a job, the man said he's begun to look elsewhere in town for work, but he isn't optimistic about his chances of finding a local position that offers comparable wages.

As the only breadwinner in his family, he was earning \$27 an hour at the UMTRA site, and he said he

thinks he'd have trouble adjusting to a lower salary.

"You get used to a certain amount of money," he said. "... It's such a high-paying job, and you go from a high-paying job to other jobs in town that are paying like \$12 an hour."

Ideally, he'd like to work for Intrepid Potash, and if he can't, he thinks he'd have to hold three lower-paying jobs in order to support his family. If his hopes don't pan out, he worries that he may have to move out of town to find another job, and he said he's not alone.

"I know a lot of the other guys are in the same boat," he said.

While Metzler acknowledged that it's a tough time for everyone right now, he voiced confidence that the project team will be able to minimize any protracted delays in the near future by spacing out its tailings shipments.

"With this two-train scenario, what that allows is that there will not be any more curtailments," Metzler said. "It seems like each year, for almost five years now, we're just always fighting how to avoid a curtailment."

Metzler said that crews plan to use their time going forward to expand the Crescent Junction disposal cell, where they are nearly running out of room to bury the tailings.

"We're making great progress, but that's a fairly expensive activity," he said.

It's a strange predicament, which he linked to past support that kept the project on track: Each year that the project avoided a three-month curtailment, he said, the team shipped that many more tailings to the Crescent Junction site.

"We were more productive, and with that, we were filling up our disposal cell, so ... we would've had enough room in our disposal cell to make it to the beginning of (fiscal year) 2017, but only by just days," he said. "It was that close in all of our projections, so we thought it was the best, most wise decision -- almost like buying insurance -- to (say), let's get started on excavating the next portion of the disposal cell."

County officials lobby state, feds for project funding

The DOE's national office announced in February that it is seeking a "modest" \$3.8 million in budget cuts from UMTRA for the 2017 fiscal year, only weeks after committing its continued support for the project.

The agency's Office of Environmental Management said that its proposed reduction is needed to align its priorities throughout the Moab UMTRA cleanup complex, including the long-term disposal cell near

Crescent Junction.

"The decrease reflects (a) shift in activities from transportation of tailings to excavation of disposal cell capacity," the agency said in its budget justification to Congress.

The Grand County Council and Moab Mayor Dave Sakrison subsequently sent a letter to Utah's congressional delegation to intervene for a reallocation of project funding. On the heels of that letter, GOP Rep. Jason Chaffetz of Utah has since urged the agency to boost those funds, and to reverse the workforce reductions.

Grand County Council member Mary McGann has also turned to state lawmakers for \$5 million, along with enough money to keep the project operating at normal levels for another month, as officials continue to lobby for more funding.

"I'm not holding my breath," McGann said. "From the lack of response from the state, I don't think we're going to get any help from them."

Moab Tailings Project Steering Committee member Joette Langianese, who previously served on the county council, urged local officials to remain vigilant in their support for future project funding.

"If they forget about us, they're going to forget about us, and so it's something that I think is really important for the county council to just constantly be on top of it all the time," she said during the committee's meeting on Tuesday, April 26.

In the past, Utah's state lawmakers signed a resolution in support of the cleanup, which would not be complete now until the early 2030s at reduced funding levels.

"So they did buy into moving it," Langianese said.

Phil Goble, the uranium mill manager for the Utah Department of Environmental Quality's Division of Waste Management and Radiation Control, acknowledged that state officials have committed funds to similar sites around Utah. But in this case, he said, the state never reached an agreement with the Nuclear Regulatory Commission.

According to Metzler, the state wound up with about \$8 million in surety for the old Atlas Mill site, and that's far short of the estimated \$100 million that it would have to commit to a 10 percent cost-sharing agreement, Goble said.

"The reason why they excluded Moab (UMTRA) was because 10 percent of a billion dollars is \$100 million, and the state wasn't about to take that on," he said.

It sounds like a great idea, Goble said.

“The state ought to pitch in, but legally, it's excluded,” he said.

Nothing, however, prevents state lawmakers from chipping in if they want to, steering committee members noted.