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Thirty to 35 positions to be eliminated 'indefinitely' at UMTRA site

by Molly Marcello
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Employees at the Moab Uranium Mill Tailings Remedial Action Project (UMTRA) were notified by the Department of Energy (DOE) on April 6 that approximately 35 of the 112 positions would be indefinitely eliminated at the end of the month, according to Grand County UMTRA Liaison Lee Shenton. DOE officials said the decision to layoff workers comes after the number of tailings shipments was reduced from four shipments per week to two per week while the cleanup effort focuses on excavating more room in the disposal cell in Crescent Junction.

“With this reduction in shipments, there will be a reduction in staff,” said DOE Project Manager Don Metzler.

Instead of having separate crews between the Moab and Crescent Junction sites, Metzler said the project will have one main crew that loads the train at Moab one day and unloads the train at Crescent Junction the next day. Although it's not yet determined which positions will be “involuntarily separated,” Metzler said those employees whose positions will be eliminated will be officially notified in writing on April 26, which will be their last day at UMTRA.

“The duration of the reductions in force is indefinite, but is expected to extend at least through 2017,” Metzler said.

After the project reached a milestone in January of relocating half of the 16 million tons of contaminated waste from the former Atlas Uranium mill site to the disposal cell near Crescent Junction, DOE officials learned that UMTRA was slated to receive about \$3.8 million less in federal funding for fiscal year 2017 under the budget proposed by the Obama administration. For fiscal year 2016, the UMTRA project received \$38.644 million in federal funds, while the proposed 2017 budget allocated \$34.784 million to the project.

In letter sent in March to Utah's congressional delegation, the Grand County Council and Moab Mayor Dave Sakrison described the damaging effects to UMTRA, including layoffs and work stoppage, if the budget is approved as submitted.

“I've been in contact with our congressional delegation so they're aware of it, and trying to get some traction in that respect,” said Moab Mayor Dave Sakrison. “I'm disappointed this is going to happen, pushing the timeframe out for the completion. I'm not too pleased about that, but we'll work through it and see if we can come up with a better solution.”

Grand County UMTRA liaison Lee Shenton said that local leaders have done an excellent job keeping the project at the forefront of the minds of Utah's congressional delegation. However, city and county officials, as well as the contractor for the UMTRA project, ultimately have no control over federal funding decisions, Shenton said.

"The Steering Committee, county council and Mayor Sakrison have diligently kept the Moab UMTRA 'on the radar screen' of our congressional delegation and the downstream stakeholders, but DOE priorities have changed," Shenton said. "It's not anything Moab UMTRA has or has not done. If anything, the reduction may have been more substantial if Moab UMTRA didn't have such a good track record."

Shenton said he believes the DOE has changed priorities over the last several years, focusing its funding efforts on higher-risk remediation projects like the Hanford Nuclear Facility in southeast Washington state, and away from lower-risk projects like the Moab UMTRA site cleanup.

"While we all hoped Moab's funding would not be reduced, the predicted reduction has in fact occurred," Shenton said. "For me, it is difficult to argue that the overall DOE [Office of Environmental Management] strategy is inappropriate. Hanford, for example, has materials that are much more hazardous than mill tailings and is only about 200 miles upstream of major population centers in Portland, Oregon, and Vancouver, Washington, on the Columbia River."

Shenton said he expects that funding for the Moab UMTRA site will remain lowered over the next couple years.

"While it's difficult to predict how Congress might set appropriations in the future, even if DOE gets more [funding] there's no guarantee their [headquarters] would allocate more to [the agency's Office of Environmental Management] or specifically to Moab UMTRA, so I believe the community should expect funding to stay lower for several years," Shenton said.

Although local officials agree that the layoffs and work slowdown are mostly out of their hands, many have promised to remain proactive in trying to secure additional funding for the Moab project site.

"I asked if there was anything we could do at this point [and] it doesn't appear there is," said Mary McGann, Grand County Council liaison to the Moab Tailings Project Steering Committee, a group of local, state and federal stakeholders that monitor the progress at the Moab UMTRA site. "It seems a bit out of our hands. We've written our congressmen, and we've been proactive that way. I don't want to throw in the towel, I would like to be more proactive if possible if there's anything we could do."

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