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## Toxic spill raises fear at White Mesa uranium mill

White Mesa raises fear about toxic spills, water

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Photo by: Jim Mimiaga/The Journal

Colin Larrick and Scott Clow, of the Ute Mountain environmental department, discuss the pollution threats of the White Mesa uranium mill at a meeting Monday in southeast Utah.

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By [Jim Mimiaga](#) Journal staff writer

WHITE MESA – Residents on Monday raised heightened concerns about the outdated uranium mill outside town, amid a report of two recent toxic spills and a new report that says toxic metals are threatening their water supply.

The White Mesa uranium mill, in southeast Utah between Bluff and Blanding, has operated for 36 years, outliving older waste-containment ponds. It sits on private land two miles north of the Ute Mountain Utes' White Mesa reservation in Utah.

Fifty residents from the towns of Bluff, White Mesa, and Blanding gathered Monday at the White Mesa community center for an update on the mill's condition, its controversial alternative-waste milling operations, and a lawsuit filed by Grand Canyon Trust to close outdated waste containment ponds.

Especially upsetting were the toxic spills.

Twice in the past two years, trucks from the Cameco Resources uranium mine in Wyoming leaked part of their toxic load while en route to the mill, including an incident in March that spilled radioactive barium sulfate sludge along U.S. Highway 191.

It is a major concern that the public was not immediately notified of the danger, said White Mesa resident and Ute Mountain Ute tribal member Yolanda Badback.

“Our kids travel that road every day in school buses. What if there is an accident involving one of these trucks?” she said. “Being notified of a spill should be a big priority so we are aware of the danger and don’t drive through it or walk through it, bringing it home.”

Besides processing uranium ore, the mill is licensed to accept alternative feed sources of radioactive waste from other sites, including mines, EPA Superfund cleanup sites, and military weapon and testing sites. The waste is milled to extract the uranium, and chemicals left over are stored permanently at the mill site.

“When radioactive wastes from across the country need to be deposited, they think of White Mesa because it is the cheapest, so that is a big concern,” said Scott Clow, environmental director for the Ute Mountain tribe, which is based in Towaoc.

The mill is the only conventional uranium mill in the nation and is licensed to accept a certain amount of alternative waste, he said. The worry is that the mill will be expanded to accept more and more of the waste.

‘These wastes will be here forever’ Clow and his staff, who have been monitoring the mill for decades, are pushing Utah regulators to shut down and reclaim the mill’s outdated, single-lined containment ponds. If wastes leak through the single lining, it enters the ground, and possibly, the water supply.

“They have not been upgraded since the 1980s,” he said. “We are looking for protection of groundwater and the deeper aquifer far into the future because these wastes will be here forever.”

The mill also uses two cells with leak-detection technology. The preferred system utilizes a second liner, which catches water that escapes the first liner. The water is then pumped back into the cell.

The Ute Mountain tribe and Grand Canyon Trust are pushing for stricter standards to protect groundwater from contamination, and hope to defeat a proposal by the EPA to increase allowable radon emissions.

The tribe suspects the pollution standards are being altered so the mill stays in compliance with state and federal rules, a requirement that must be met before it can accept alternative feed wastes.

“The liners are leaking, and they are bringing in uranium wastes the mill is not equipped to handle safely,” said Ute Mountain Tribal Chairman Manuel Heart. “It’s been frustrating, and is similar to the Standing Rock protest because it has to do with water quality.”

'We see clear signs of leakage'An increase in heavy metals and acidity in wells and springs near the mill is a concern, said Colin Larrick, a water quality specialist with the tribe.

"We see clear signs of leakage, and feel it is urgent that the state take action to prevent a catastrophe," he said.

A geological survey between 2008 and 2010 showed high levels of heavy metals and uranium in nearby Entrance Spring and higher acidity and heavy metals in monitoring wells.

"There are more and more metals showing up that are not natural, but exist in the containment cells and mill facility," Clow said.

Based on sediment samples near the mill, the tribe suspects that toxic emissions from the mill's stack are falling to the ground and being washed by storms across the road to a spring.

In response to concerns, Utah Department of Environment has required additional monitoring wells at the mill, officials said.

Heart said interpretation of contamination data between Utah regulators and tribal environmental officials differ.

"I think it is about the money because the (alternative feed) is seen as business opportunity, but it puts our communities at risk because we feel it is not done safely," he said. "We have to stand together, educate the community, and let our concerns be known."

Grand Canyon Trust filed a lawsuit against the mill in 2014, arguing that it violates federal rules by having more than two operating containment cells. Oral arguments are set for November in U.S. District court in Salt Lake City.

'A band-aid on a gushing wound'Tribe officials are pushing for more reclamation while the plant continues to operate.

Based on the mill's reclamation plan, it is estimated that cleanup would cost more than \$100 million, Ute officials said, but the mill is only bonded for \$22 million.

"Lets get some reclamation going along the way because it is safer for the public and the workers, and reduces the costs at the tail end," Clow said, adding that shortfalls in cleanup costs are typically picked up by the taxpayer.

The tribe would like to see the mill shut down, but it is not likely to happen because it is the only conventional uranium mill operating in the nation, and its services are needed by the uranium industry nationwide.

"It sounds like trying to put a band-aid on a gushing wound," said David Yearicks, a Ute Mountain tribal member from White Mesa. "The regulations seem really loose, and I wonder about the future of our community."

For Bluff resident Joyce Martini, it's about the water.

“It affects a lot of towns in this area because we all depend on water,” she said. “The biggest concern I had moving here was this mill.”

‘This would never be tolerated ...’The official word is that drinking water in the White Mesa community safe to drink. And the tribe recently received a \$2 million grant to build a water treatment facility for the 300 community members in White Mesa.

Residents and environmentalists say they want to keep it safe.

Education and making your voice heard is the key to improving the mill’s safety, Ann Mariah Tapp, a Grand Canyon Trust lawyer, said.

“A lot of time, regulators do not hear from community members, and making your voice heard during public comment periods on permit and license renewals will get their attention,” she said.

“People think this is the middle of nowhere, so they don’t pay as much attention. The more you take action, the closer we get to getting change at this site.”

Bradley Angel, of the environmental group Green Action, said it feels like the area has become “a sacrifice zone.”

“This would never be tolerated in a rich community,” he said. “There are real people here with real families that should not be exposed to radioactive pollution.”

A protest march from the White Mesa Community Center to the White Mesa mill is planned for Tuesday, Oct. 11, at 8 a.m.

[jmimiaga@the-journal.com](mailto:jmimiaga@the-journal.com)



Photo by: Jim Mimiaga/The Journal

David Yearicks, a Ute Mountain tribal member from White Mesa, expresses concerns about the health risks of contaminated groundwater on people and animals. Sarah Fields, of Uranium Watch, listens.



Photo by: Jim Mimiaga/The Journal

Thelma Whiskers, a Ute Mountain tribal member, said the mill should be shut down because of its risk to public health and the land.



Photo by: Jim Mimiaga/The Journal

Ute Mountain councilman Malcolm Cuthair, representing White Mesa, and Ute Mountain Tribal Chairman Manuel Heart explained the importance of working together to express need for changes at the White Mesa uranium mill.