

Utes Fear Uranium Mill is Becoming Radioactive Waste Dump

WHITE MESA, Utah -- Native tribes and environmental groups alike are worried that a Utah uranium-processing mill is becoming a dumping ground for foreign industrial polluters -- and that regulators are doing nothing to stop it.

The White Mesa Uranium Mill in San Juan County has begun accepting tons of radioactive waste from other countries. The mill's owner claims the shipments are uranium ore for processing, but Tim Peterson, cultural landscapes program director for the [Grand Canyon Trust](#), said less than 1% of the material from nations such as Estonia and Japan becomes treated uranium. The rest is destined for the waste pits.

"They view it as waste, but when it comes into the U.S., it's regarded as something that the mill can accept and process without any sort of licensing, without any public notice, without any public comment," he said. "We're concerned that the White Mesa mill not become the world's radioactive waste dump."

Peterson said the nearby Ute Mountain Ute tribe fears toxic pollution will spread to their native lands and the nearby Bears Ears National Monument. A [Utah Department of Environmental Quality](#) spokesman said the White Mesa mill currently meets all state and federal licensing requirements.

Peterson contended that Utah officials, who regulate the site for the federal government, have become too close to the uranium-mining industry and are turning a blind eye to the mill's operations.

"We're concerned with the concept or the process of 'sham recycling,' which is where something that's considered waste in one location becomes something to recycle for uranium content when it arrives at the White Mesa mill," he said.

Peterson said tribal leaders are especially concerned that the radioactive waste can't be safely contained in White Mesa's 350-acre waste field.

"The Ute Mountain Ute/White Mesa community is down-gradient from the mill," he said, "and while I can't speak for them, I know that they're concerned about the degradation of their water quality, as well as air quality and materials that they have to breathe."

He said the mill opened in the late 1970s to process low-grade uranium ore. He added that federal nuclear regulators ruled in 2010 that an import license is required to process materials from foreign countries for disposal, but said there's no record of the mill obtaining such a permit.

The UDEQ letter is online at grandcanyontrust.org.