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White Mesa plans meeting on uranium mill issues

Ute Mountain tribe will give update on mill status



Photo by: Courtesy of White Mesa Mill

Barium sulfate, a radioactive waste product of uranium mining, leaked from this container truck in March while en route to the White Mesa mill disposal site in southeast Utah.

By [Jim Mimiaga](#) Journal staff writer

Because of concerns about water quality and a recent toxic spill at the White Mesa uranium mill, the Ute Mountain Ute tribe will host an informational meeting on Oct. 3 at 6 p.m. at the community center, located at 14 Willow St., White Mesa Utah.

Experts and community leaders will provide updates on the mill's status and its environmental issues.

Attending are Yolanda Badback and Thelma Whiskers, White Mesa community members whose family has been fighting against the mill for 30 years. Also planning to attend are Scott Clow, head of the tribe's environmental office, who has pushed for better regulation of the White Mesa Mill; Colin Larrick, the tribe's water quality specialist; and Malcolm Lehi, Ute Mountain Ute tribal Council member for White Mesa Community, a satellite reservation of the tribe.

The 36-year old mill, located on private land south of Blanding, Utah, is the only conventional uranium mill operating in the country. It processes uranium ore into yellow cake, which is shipped for processing into fuel for nuclear power plants. The mill also processes alternative feed sources of uranium, and accepts wastes from other uranium mines for storage in containment cells.

The Ute Mountain Ute tribe criticized the mill's operations and has claimed that liners in waste containment ponds are inadequate. In May, the tribe and Grand Canyon Trust released the film "Half Life: The Story of America's Last Uranium Mill," which claimed that the mill's waste storage ponds threaten groundwater, springs and aquifers relied upon by the nearby White Mesa community, a satellite of the Ute Mountain Ute reservation.

"Seeps and springs are the only water sources in the area, and the concern is that radioactive, toxic waste from tailing cell impoundments will migrate down and find its way to these springs," said Colin Larrick, a water-quality specialist with the tribe.

In 2014, Grand Canyon Trust filed a lawsuit against the mill's owner, Energy Fuels, alleging the mill exceeded radon emission standards and was operating more many waste containment cells than regulations allowed. The mill denied the claims, and responded they are complying with Utah regulators of the mill.

On Aug. 30, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission ordered Cameco and Power Resources to stop delivering toxic shipments of barium sulfate sludge from their Wyoming uranium mine to the waste cells at the White Mesa mill. The order came after it was revealed in August, 2015 and March 2016 that trucks transporting the waste from the mine near Glenrock, Wyoming, twice showed up at the mill leaking toxic and radioactive contents.

In the more severe leak on March 28-29, the white sludge spilled onto the road that enters the White Mesa mill off U.S. Highway 191. It had also splattered onto the side of the truck during transport.

White Mesa mill officials estimated that not more than 5 gallons of the radioactive material leaked onto the shipping truck and pavement at the mill's entrance. However, the total amount that leaked along the nearly 600-mile truck route from Wyoming could not be confirmed.

NRC and Utah officials say it is unknown how much of the waste might have leaked out of the container en route. The shipment began with 13 cubic yards of waste, but Ryan Johnson, of the Utah Department of Environmental Quality, said the load wasn't measured upon arrival at the White Mesa mill was not measured.

An NRC investigation in June concluded Cameco failed to effectively package the waste and did not accurately describe the contents and quantity of loads in shipping papers.

"While the licensee took several corrective actions after the August 2015 incident, the corrective actions were not effective," wrote Kriss Kennedy, NRC regional administrator.

The NRC required Cameco to retrace the route of the shipment to investigate if there were additional radioactive contamination, but none could be detected.

During transport, there was a winter storm that would have washed away road contamination, “making it impossible to determine when the leaking of the transport began,” reported Scott Anderson, director of the Utah Division of Waste Management and Radiation Control, in a letter to the NRC.

The mill’s operations and its waste deliveries have been an ongoing concern for the neighboring Ute Mountain Ute tribe.

Tribal Chairman Manuel Heart expressed dismay that the public was not notified of the spill when it happened, noting that community members walk along Highway 191 where the spill occurred.

“When that waste material dries, it becomes airborne and impacts human and animal health,” he said.

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Photo by: Jim Mimiaga/Cortez Journal

Anne Mariah Tapp, an attorney for Grand Canyon Trust, presents proposed new regulations that reduce radon monitoring at the White Mesa Uranium Mill during a community meeting in 2014. Jennifer Thurston, of Information Network for Responsible Mining, and Sarah Fields of Uranium Watch look on.

