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# Off the Beat

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## AEC vs. the public: The case of the uranium tailings

A turning point has just been passed in what has got to be one of the most shameful pages in the history of any Federal bureaucracy.

For 25 years, state and Federal health authorities have been unsuccessful in convincing the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission of the dangers created by the 100,000 tons of radioactive tailings (wastes) left in scores of piles at AEC-licensed uranium mill sites across eight western states.

Only last month, in a letter to the eight governors, the AEC finally reversed its position, acknowledging that a "potential health problem" did exist after all, and asked state assistance to study "corrective action."

"Radium in uranium mill tailings," said the AEC, "is the principal source of public health concern because of the radioactive radon gas which continuously emanates. Since radium has a half-life of 1,600 years, the problem is a persistent one."

Breathing the radon and the solid matter associated with the gas mimics the situation in a uranium mine and causes lung cancer.

But the AEC knowingly let the problem occur in the first place. When it was first discovered by the Federal Water Pollution Control Agency, the AEC first refused to acknowledge the seriousness of the problem and then, remarkably, made a substantial effort to prevent others from doing so. Consequently, corrective action has been impeded and the population at risk has had their exposure to the radioactivity unnecessarily prolonged for many years.

By 1966, it had been established by the states, notably Colorado, that the radioactive tailings had polluted several municipal drinking water supplies, the air of several towns, and had been used as fill around thousands of new homes, creating radioactive atmospheres inside those homes similar to the air in uranium mines.

The AEC response in 1966 was that uranium tailings piles presented no health hazard at all, either short or long term. Furthermore, said the AEC, the problem was not their responsibility anyway, even though the mills operated under AEC licenses which contained broadly phrased health and safety provisions.

In 1968, the Colorado Health Department requested funds from the U.S.

Public Health Service in order to investigate the indoor radon situation in Grand Junction, Colo., homes. The AEC managed to review that grant request and on the AEC's recommendation, the Public Health Service turned down the state's request.

In its review letter, the AEC said the high levels of radon, which by then were being found in many homes, "can be expected from natural radioactivity."

Having thus put itself out on a limb, the AEC began a research project in Tennessee and Florida, in an area of high natural radioactivity, expecting to find a duplication of the situation in Grand Junction.

As it turned out, the highest level (in Florida) reported by the AEC was 100 times lower than the high levels found by the Colorado Department of Health. So the AEC quietly suppressed its own report with this stamp on it: "NOTICE, THIS REPORT IS FOR INTERNAL USE ONLY. IT MAY NOT BE PUBLISHED."

By 1970 the AEC was the only public agency which still maintained that tailings were no problem, and the situation had become an acute embarrassment to the commission.

A technique of deceit sometimes employed in such situations is to rewrite history. That year an AEC report claimed that it had warned all the "applicable state health departments in early 1961" that "... the radium content of these tailings may be such as to warrant control by appropriate state authorities."

If that letter had indeed been sent, it might vindicate the AEC's complete silence on the dangers it had left behind in the aftermath of its quest for raw materials. But no one outside the

AEC can remember such a letter.

Colorado's Health Department polled the eight other states named by the AEC as having been sent the "1961 letter." Not one of those states has a record of the correspondence.

Robert Siek, then chief of Radiological Health for Colorado said, "If such a letter was really sent, you would think at least one state would have some knowledge or record of it."

Although the AEC refuses to pay for cleaning up its mess, an Environmental Protection Agency report says that the use of tailings "resulted primarily from Federal negligence and therefore, we support the use of Federal funds for remedial action."

Sen. Frank Morse (D-Utah) submitted a bill calling for a cleanup in his state, with the AEC paying for three-quarters of the cost, and Utah paying the rest. In March, at the urging of the AEC, the Nixon Administration called for that bill's defeat, stating that it would be "premature" and that further studies should be made.

And so the studies go on, 25 years after they first began.

Thus, AEC functionaries are managing the "corrective action" themselves. Many of them are the same individuals responsible for the fiasco in the first place. By forever stalling they hope to postpone the inevitable long enough so that people will forget the problem, or at the very least, who was at fault. □

—H. Peter Metzger

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