

Lawmakers take aim at uranium mills

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The water in the containment ponds at the Cotter Uranium Mill near Cañon City is a dingy yellow/brown color, tinted by the million of tons of heavy metals and toxic waste stored in them.

The linings of the ponds are slowly leaking contaminating the groundwater around the mill.

The area has been declared a Superfund site by the Environmental Protection Agency, giving it federal priority for clean up. However, nothing has been done yet.

"I think it's absolutely absurd that 4.5 million tons of this kind of waste can be sitting a mile from somebody's house," said Sharyn Cunningham as she looked at the mill from an overlook nearby.

Cunningham is co-chairperson of the group Colorado Citizens Against Toxic Waste, one of several groups to rally at the Fremont County Courthouse Tuesday in support of tougher legislation on uranium mills.

The Uranium Processing Accountability Act is being sponsored by in the Colorado Assembly by Representative Buffie McFadyen, (D) Pueblo West, and Senators Ken Kester (R) Las Animas and Bob Bacon (D) Fort Collins.

It requires uranium mill operators in the state to comply with all clean up orders before new applications are processed and it strengthens public oversight of bonding requirements for clean-up and decommissioning.

Fremont County Commissioner Mike Stiehl the bill has the potential to force Cotter to clean up its mess.

"The biggest difference is that it will allow the health department to be able to require clean-ups on spills and releases that happen, when they happen or soon thereafter," Stiehl said.

Under the bill, mill operators will also be required to inform residents about contamination threats to their well water.

The mills will also need to amend their operating license before accepting new sources of "alternate feed" material, such as radioactive or toxic waste from industrial or medical operations. Small amounts of uranium ore can be extracted from alternate feed sources.

The bill has already been endorsed by more than 30 organizations and businesses in Fremont County, and more than 50 groups state wide.

For the last four years, the Cotter Corporation has stopped processing uranium under a self-imposed "stand down," but last year they announced plans to start it up again.

A letter written by John Hamrick, Cotter's Vice President of Milling, to the state health department in March of 2009 indicates that the company plans to refurbish the Cañon City facility and begin processing uranium ore from a mine in New Mexico sometime in 2014.

Hamrick could not be reached for comment Tuesday.