

Huge toxic pile by river to be moved

Radioactive waste has polluted the Colorado

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A 10-million-ton pile of radioactive waste that has been polluting the Colorado River for decades will be moved under a plan announced yesterday by the U.S. Department of Energy.

The decision comes after years of heated and emotional debate over what to do with the pile, which sits 750 feet from the river near the tourist town of Moab, Utah.

The decision is being hailed as an environmental victory that will safeguard the drinking water of more than 25 million people, including most San Diego County residents.

Energy Secretary Samuel Bodman notified the department's Office of Environmental Management of his decision yesterday. It won't be official until the final environmental impact statement is issued, though the agency rarely goes against such recommendations.

"It's done," said Don Metzler, the Energy Department's longtime project manager at the site. "The secretary has made a very good decision. I can't think of anybody who would oppose it."

The waste will be dug up, then shipped by rail and buried on a desolate expanse of open range about 30 miles from the river. Planning will begin immediately, but the task is so immense that the first scoop probably won't be removed until 2007.

The job is expected to be completed by 2012.

San Diego County draws two-thirds of its water from the Colorado River. The river also supplies drinking water to Los Angeles, Las Vegas, Phoenix and many other cities in the Southwest.



"It would be an understatement to say we are anything but ecstatic," said Wes Bannister, chairman of the board of the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, one of the largest agencies drawing water from the river.

If a natural disaster had pushed the pile "into the water, it would have been one of the most critical issues we have ever seen. It makes us all feel a lot more comfortable."

The decision is being praised by everyone from politicians to residents of Moab.

Members of Congress and governors from five states had joined with concerned citizens in Escondido, San Diego and Encinitas in calling for the removal of the radioactive waste.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the U.S. Department of Interior also wanted the pile moved.

"The Colorado is becoming more precious every year and this is the most prudent step to ensuring it remains a healthy water source," said Bill Hedden, executive director of the environmental group Grand Canyon Trust and one of the leading advocates of getting the pile moved.

Sam Taylor, co-publisher of the Times-Independent newspaper in Moab, called the decision a "tremendous victory."



Associated Press
An aerial photograph shows the pile of radioactive waste along the Colorado River in Moab, Utah, that will be moved to another Utah site about 30 miles from the river.

"This is absolutely the outcome we were looking for," he said.

The Energy Department had considered a number of alternatives, including capping the pile and leaving it at its current site in a scenic valley of red-rock canyons. Moving the pile is expected to cost \$329 million to \$464 million, while capping it would have cost \$166 million.

The pile of tailings, or residue, is from one of the nation's largest uranium processing plants, which opened near Moab in 1956.

Uranium ore, found in large concentrations in southeastern Utah, was refined for use in atomic weapons during the Cold War. It was later used in nuclear power generators.

The toxic leftovers – uranium, arsenic, ammonia and other poisonous substances – continued growing until the mill closed in 1986. The mound is 94 feet high and spreads over 130 acres.

One of the biggest fears has been that a catastrophic natural disaster, such as a flood or an earthquake, could dump the whole pile into the river, although scientists disagree on the likelihood of such a scenario.

At one point, groundwater contaminated by the waste was leaking into the river at an estimated 28,000 gallons a day, although recent Energy Department cleanup efforts slowed the contamination to 15,000 gallons a day.

The pollution is diluted over the river's meandering course to Southern California, and studies have shown that the slightly elevated levels of radiation in the water aren't close to the danger level.

Scientists also have pointed out that the Moab pile isn't the only source of pollution to the river.

Nevertheless, former Utah Gov. Olene Walker, who lobbied to get the pile moved before she left office in January, sees the Energy Department's decision as crucial to the river's health.

"While it does not make the Colorado pure, it does mean that these tailings will no longer be one of the contributing factors to the pollution of the river," Walker said.

Rep. Bob Filner, D-San Diego, who has pushed Congress for years to get the pile moved, said the action is long overdue. He's upset that it could take seven years to finish the project.

"This is our water and we need to make sure it is safe for now and generations to come," he said.

Gordon Hess, director of imported water for the San Diego County Water Authority, applauded the decision. "This is a positive step in recognizing the importance of moving the tailings and not leaving them next to the river," he said.

Metzler, the project manager, said the new site offers an ideal natural container of impermeable Mancos shale that is 2,500 feet deep.

"It's a big, thick, wonderful substrata for disposal," he said.

The site, northeast of U.S. 191 at Interstate 70 near Crescent Junction, will be excavated and a liner will be installed over the shale.

The plan also calls for more work at the current site, including cleanup of groundwater that has been contaminated by toxins leaking from the pile.

The Moab pile is the only tailings site supervised by the Department of Energy that hasn't been cleaned up. The department has moved 21 smaller and less-toxic tailings piles away from rivers over the last two decades for more than \$1 billion.

Union-Tribune researcher Merrie Montegudo contributed to this report.