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## Toxic plume spurs study of public health

### Uranium mill

By Bruce Finley  
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"I almost died twice," said Kathleen Hance, 50, who described her symptoms as leaving her "numb but not paralyzed." For years she worked near the Cotter Corp. uranium mill. ( RJ Sangosti, The Denver Post )

CAÑON CITY — The federal government has begun a required but long-delayed comprehensive review of public health in Cañon City as newly found toxic pollution spreads from a shuttered uranium mill.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry launched the review in response to new data and community concerns that pollution may contribute to unexplained ailments including cancer, miscarriages and neurological problems.

Researchers now are analyzing data in what environmental scientist Teresa Foster called "the first comprehensive public-health assessment" for the city since the government declared the Cotter Corp. mill an environmental disaster.

"We're going to look at the potential for exposure and try to make some conclusions about the potential health impacts from those exposures," Foster said. "We're not saying these were caused by the contamination. We're not at the point where we can make that determination. We're taking the community's concerns very seriously."

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency officials also are taking a new look at how many residents near the mill may be relying on groundwater for drinking and cooking water. Since 1986, federal authorities have been required to conduct public-health assessments at every "Superfund" cleanup site.

Among concerned residents in Cañon City, a physician's assistant last summer questioned whether some ailments suffered by his patients might be linked to pollution from the mill.

Cotter officials have been contemplating a reopening of their plant to provide yellowcake uranium for an expected national expansion of nuclear power plants.

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They point to state studies conducted in the 1990s that found slightly elevated community cancer rates, which were deemed "not statistically significant." And they suspect that the renewed focus on whether the plant has caused health problems might be motivated by a desire to keep it closed.

Cañon City residents "are concerned, and people deserve to have their concerns addressed," said John Hamrick, vice president of milling for Lakewood-based Cotter. "At some point, it's not a concern anymore but an attitude or desire to see us go away. . . . Twenty-five percent of the people can stop just about everything."

### New contamination in water

It has been 24 years since the federal government designated the mill a Superfund cleanup site, based on radioactive contamination of air and groundwater drifting away from the 2,600-acre site just south of the city.

Today the cleanup is less than half complete. A new plume of uranium-contaminated groundwater is spreading unchecked from the mill under a golf course toward Cañon City (population 15,850) and the Arkansas River, state documents and Cotter mill operators confirmed.

The hulking mill is one of four facilities in the country capable of converting uranium ore into the yellowcake needed to make nuclear power. (Only one, in Utah, is now in operation.)

Residents near the plant have complained for years about a variety of ailments they believe could be partly a result of exposure to contaminated air or groundwater coming from plant property.

"You do start to wonder," said Jina Harding, 49, who fell last May as she tried to climb out of bed,

pain searing from her hips to her ankles.

She suspects groundwater she used to water her garden at her home near the mill might be causing her pain. State health officials assured her and her husband the water was safe.

"We wanted to believe them," she said recently at a new home, farther from the mill, where she spends most of her days in a chair.

A recent report to the state government from a clinic operator raised concerns again.

Physician's assistant Jason Morgan, who runs the walk-in Havens Family Clinic, on May 8 alerted Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment officials that he had nine female patients who suffer unexplained symptoms, including nausea, weakness and difficulty walking.

A state health toxicologist called him back asking for details. State officials later determined the evidence didn't rise to the level that merits an investigation.

"In order for someone to get contaminated, the groundwater has to migrate from where it is to where they are," said Steve Tarlton, radiation management unit leader for the state. "We do monitoring around that site to detect whether there will be contamination moving off that site."

State regulators are confident people are safe, he said.

Morgan and others are doubtful.

State officials "say they do monitoring, but do they really? Nobody has physically come and met with me or talked with patients or looked at test results," Morgan said. "Wouldn't they like to clear the air

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about this if their interest is in protecting the public?"

Trawling a Wal-Mart parking lot recently, Patricia Dunne, 42, searched for a close-in space so she could refill her pain-med prescription.

She winced as she hobbled — "stabbing pains, numbness, weakness . . . like 50 pounds on my legs" — shunning the wheelchair carts Wal-Mart offers customers. When she reached a dozen-deep line at the pharmacy, she turned back. Too painful to stand that long, she said, leaving to go home.

She questioned whether mill pollution could have caused her symptoms because she's lived in the area only since 1995, she said. "If it is them, they need to fix us who are sick and prevent others from getting it."

Longtime resident Mary McFarlin, 39, who grew up within 2 miles of the mill, anguishes over whether the pollution could have caused her cancers.

"I can't prove it," McFarlin said, crying in a doctor's office. First diagnosed at age 15, she now has eight tumors, including one in her brain that a doctor recently diagnosed as untreatable.

"I'm ruined over it," she said. "Clean up the waste, for the future, because there's still children living in that area." Government experts "need to take more samples, because the dust from Cotter blows around the area," she said.

### "Notice of violation"

In 2005, Cañon City residents took a poll of 239 residents and former residents of an area near the mill and their children. This informal survey found 150 reported cases of cancer, 26 miscarriages, 28 cases of nerve problems, 19 kidney problems, 42

lung problems and more.

Three years later, Morgan at his clinic began to suspect a link between the ailments suffered by his female patients — nerve damage, exhaustion, unexplained pain — and pollution from the plant. Two months after Morgan called for state help, state regulators reported the new plume of contaminated groundwater spreading from the mill toward Cañon City and the river — with no barrier in place to stop it.

State officials in July issued a "notice of violation" giving Cotter 60 days to come up with a remedy. In a separate federal court case this year, Cotter pleaded guilty and was fined \$15,000 for its role in the poisoning deaths of more than 40 migratory geese and ducks that came into contact with toxic materials at the mill.

At the site this month, Hamrick surveyed reddish yellow-streaked ponds atop radioactive tailings.

Hamrick and his crew of 30 cleanup workers are hunting for the source of the spreading pollution, he said.

Workers at the mill processed uranium intermittently until it was closed in 2006 — trucking in ore from mines, crushing and grinding the ore, soaking it in acids to strip out uranium yellowcake, then discarding heaps of ore containing toxic and radioactive heavy metals along with acids and other chemicals.

No contaminants have reached the Arkansas River or homes, Hamrick said. The newly found pollution may come from tailings leaching into groundwater, or leaks from old, wooden storage tanks, he said.

No remedy can be put in place now because containing the pollution "depends on what we find"

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as the source, he said.

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Mill crews that conduct required air and groundwater tests — Cotter officials said they feed their readings to state regulators — previously installed underground barriers of clay and iron filings to try to block contaminated groundwater.

"We've cut stuff off here as best we can," radiation safety chief Jim Cain said.

Processing uranium "can be done safely," Hamrick said. "The risks we accept in our daily lives are a lot higher than what you accept with a uranium mill."

State authorities hold a cash deposit of \$14.7 million from Cotter as bond to ensure the company doesn't abandon the site.

The mill, if reopened, could create 110 new jobs, Hamrick said. Cotter's current payroll for maintenance crews tops \$2 million, and the company pays about \$250,000 a year in property taxes to Fremont County.

Women enduring unexplained ailments say they're more interested in answers than money.

"I almost died twice," said Kathleen Hance, 50, who worked for years at a child-care center within 2 miles of the mill, now relying on a pain-medication patch to manage symptoms that confined her to a wheelchair for three months.

"In the hospital, I couldn't walk. It was quite embarrassing, them having to do everything for me. It's like numb but not paralyzed," Hance said.

A neurologist suspected poisoning that caused nerve damage, she said. "What's in the ground out there? What's in the dirt?"

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