

Health study launched near closed uranium mill

The Associated Press

Article Last Updated: 10/19/2008 01:51:15 PM MDT

CANON CITY, Colo.—Federal researchers have begun a public health review in Canon City amid renewed concerns about pollution from a closed uranium mill.

The study, by the Health and Human Services Department, is examining potential exposure to pollution from the Cotter Corp. mill and the possible health risks.

"We're not saying these (potential health impacts) were caused by the contamination," said environmental scientist Teresa Foster. "We're not at the point where we can make that determination. We're taking the community's concerns very seriously."

Lakewood-based Cotter says previous studies concluded that slightly elevated cancer rates in Canon City were not statistically significant. One company official says the new concerns might be an attempt to head off a possible reopening of the mill.

The mill was designated a federal Superfund cleanup site 24 years ago because of radioactive contamination of air and groundwater drifting away from the site just south of Canon City. The cleanup

is less than half complete.

State documents show a new plume of contaminated groundwater is spreading from the mill toward Canon City and the Arkansas River, the Denver Post reported Sunday.

Jason Morgan, a physician's assistant who runs the Havens Family Clinic in Canon City, told state health officials in May that he had nine female patients suffering from unexplained symptoms including nausea, weakness and difficulty walking.

State officials asked for more data but later decided against a fuller 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," he said.

Tarlton said state regulators are confident people are safe.

The Cotter mill is one of just four in the country capable of converting uranium ore into the yellowcake needed to make nuclear power. Only one, in Utah, is operating now.

Cotter, a subsidiary of San Diego-based General Atomics, is discussing whether to reopen the mill because of pressure to build new nuclear power plants to reduce U.S. dependence on foreign oil.

Cotter officials have said the renewed focus on health issues might be an attempt to keep the mill closed.

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Residents "are concerned, and people deserve to have their concerns addressed," said John Hamrick, Cotter's vice president of milling.

"At some point, it's not a concern anymore but an attitude or desire to see us go away," he said.

On the Net:

Cotter Corp.: <http://www.cotterusa.com/>

Information from: The Denver Post, <http://www.denverpost.com>

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