

Oljato Mesa chosen to bury uranium mine waste

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OLJATO, Utah – U.S Environmental Protection Agency officials have received approval from Oljato Chapter residents to bury waste from the former Skyline Mine about 600 feet above the desert floor on top of Oljato Mesa in the Monument Valley area.

Skyline Mine is one of an estimated 520 abandoned uranium mines located throughout the Navajo Nation. Portions of the mine were closed by capping them with fill material, however, due to the steep terrain, mine waste at the eastern edge and bottom of the mesa were not removed during closure activities.

Radiation has been detected at an average of 10 times background level, or the standard considered by EPA to be protective of human health and the environment. During sampling in November 2008, EPA found two areas where the radiation activity measured greater than 40,000 counts per minute, compared to safe levels of 4,500 counts per minute.

Other soil samples ranged from 9,402 counts per minute to 139,125 counts per minute, with an average count of 38,663. The area with the highest count had one localized reading above 999,999 counts per minute.

“When things are above twice background, it's a concern for health effects for people,” Jason Musante, on-scene coordinator for EPA's Superfund Removal Program's Emergency Response Section, told Oljato residents during an April meeting at the chapter.

Musante said the federal agency conducted a follow-up workshop with the community in June and discussed several options for emergency cleanup of the mine wastes.

“We had originally thought that maybe we would put it right at the base of the monument where the material is, that way we weren't taking up any land that was not previously contaminated,” he said. However, Elsie Begay and her family, who live at the bottom of the mesa, were opposed to the idea.

“I just want that uranium that's out there removed – even the cable that's been there I don't know how many years now. That's the only thing I want,” Begay told EPA two years ago. Her daughter-in-law, Mary Helen, said in May that she believes the government should come back and clean up whatever they left behind.

“It's their duty to clean up everything. If it was done back in the earlier years they could have prevented a lot of health issues we're dealing with right now.”

With the general attitude being “not in my back yard or anywhere else,” Musante said, EPA began looking elsewhere.

“We looked at the former Moonlight Mine, which is about 10 miles to the south of Skyline, and that seemed to be a pretty good location, however, there was a family that lived nearby, within a half mile, who had recently lost their mother to cancer,” he said.

“Cancer equals uranium, uranium equals cancer – so they didn't want to have any project or anything to do with uranium by them, even though they live next to a former mine. Recognizing that's an emotional issue, we just said, ‘OK, fine.’”

EPA officials decided to revisit the top of Oljato Mesa where there is an existing Navajo Nation Abandoned Mine Lands repository near the original mine opening.

“Just below the mine opening proper, which is about 600 feet above the valley floor, about 200 feet below that there's sort of a slope before it becomes vertical. There are tailings down there. To get at that we're going to have to cut the slope back and impact the AML repository,” he said.

“It seemed like the best location would be up there on top of the mesa somewhere nearby the mine. That was what we presented to the chapter,” he said. The presentation was made Aug. 1 and EPA received support from the chapter to move forward with the plan.

Though an exact location on top of the mesa has not been determined, he said, “I think it made sense to people to kind of take the material and put it back near where it came from. It's really just the side of the mesa that we're going to have to try to scrape off, but it's difficult to get at.”

Musante said there is a trail around the back side of the mesa which EPA plans to improve so they can get equipment in and out, but it will not be used to haul the waste material from the valley floor.

“That road is very narrow and kind of treacherous. There would be the potential for accidents if you had people driving up and down and it would impact the Oljato Chapter more if I were to try to truck the material around the mesa because we would be driving right past the chapter house.”

Musante said his plan is to reconstruct the skyline, or what's known as a “high-line system,” which is very much like a tram, and use that to move the material from the valley floor up to the repository. “It's something that they use quite often for logging operations. They've got sort of a crane tower with a central point and then lines are run off of it,” he said.

In addition to Skyline Mine, there are several other mines on Oljato Mesa. “We looked at some of them just to see if there was some residual tailings that haven't been dealt with. We did find one where there looked to be like a small debris field below the mine opening, so I would try to incorporate that material as well,” he said.

Oljato residents raised concerns that the repository not be used for any uranium waste outside the chapter. “The one stipulation that was brought up at the chapter meeting was they didn't want to make this a repository for waste coming from like a lot of different places,” Musante said. He assured them it would be a one-time project and would be closed when the Skyline Mine work is done.

The price tag for the emergency removal action is “in the range of millions of dollars,” he said, and unlike the circumstances at Northeast Churchrock Mine where General Electric is picking up the tab for cleanup, there are no potentially responsible parties to foot the bill for the Skyline cleanup, meaning U.S. taxpayers are picking up the tab.

“There are no PRP's at this time,” Musante said. “There were a number of mines operated by so many different people, but most of those companies don't exit anymore.”

Musante is now working to have funds allocated by Sept. 30, the end of the fiscal year. This fall, the planning and engineering work will be done and contractors lined up, with work expected to begin in late winter or early spring before high winds kick in. “Right now it looks like it will take about four months. That's an idealized time-frame,” he said.