

## Cotter at the Crossroads

A community grapples with a uranium mill's past, present and future



## Commentary

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### Cotter's time has come and gone

It's time to consider decommissioning the Cotter mill south of Cañon City and moving all contaminated materials to a location that won't endanger a population center. The state Department of Public Health and Environment should begin the process with consideration of what would be required to refuse its relicensing.

There will be many in Cañon City who consider such an action to be a drastic step. But the situation speaks for itself for anyone really interested in the truth of the matter. Reasons for considering this option are numerous:

The mill was created to process uranium, not take on hazardous materials from elsewhere in the country. No one in Cañon City wants a hazardous dump site up the hill from the city. But incremental change in federal regulations already permit the plant to take on more material than those who recruited the industry 40 years ago intended.

Mill operators have denied that alternative feed material - material other than uranium ore - is in their business plan. But the chairman of the board of the Cotter Corporation has said otherwise in speeches and trade publications. It's little wonder that many in the community distrust the operators of the mill. If mill operators want the community to believe their denials, then commit to them in a written contract with the community. Agree to pay the community every dime they might earn from disposing of waste from elsewhere in the country.

The mill has a horrendous health and safety violation record going back to the very first year of operation and continuing to this year when it had a record number of violations in one year. These are not mere paperwork deficiencies. They are real, not imagined, license violations that affect the health and safety of workers and the community.

Cotter caused the Lincoln Park contamination. This is contamination that still exists. People still can't use their wells. People still can't grow food for consumption without risk. Face it: The blight on Lincoln Park is permanent - at least in the lifetimes of those there now.

Cotter's location was never right. We can apologize for it by saying science hadn't progressed far enough in the late 1950s for anyone to know, but the fact is that even then it was known that mills would produce dangerous residue and that water flows downhill. What more information was needed? Now, Cañon City has grown up to Cotter's doorstep; it's time to take drastic action to protect that population from the known contaminants of industry.

The mill sits atop a maze of coal mines which make sub-surface flow of water and contaminants difficult to predict. Soil scientists believe that the deepest of the mines probably didn't contribute to the contamination of Lincoln Park, but

what about those mines closer to the surface? While maps of the mines exist, tunnels and shafts created in the waning years of the coal boom of Fremont County were not accurately portrayed on maps. It isn't certain where they run, thus creating an uncertain risk for the people living below the mill. The Arkansas River, in more ways than one more important to Cañon City than any other feature in the region, must be protected.

No one really knows what's in the tailings ponds. There are some who claim to know, but testimony in lawsuits from Cotter executives and those pressing claims against the company makes it clear that what is in the ponds is somewhat of a mystery. For sure, the health department doesn't know and no one will acknowledge whether tests have been done.

In the event of a 100-year flood - or, God forbid, an event like the Big Thompson flood - the detention ponds would end up in Cañon City and Pueblo.

There's precedent in Colorado for moving the material out of where it could be harmful. Grand Junction cleaned out the tailings of its uranium mill years ago and moved them to a dry reservoir between Grand Junction and Delta. This would be a costly maneuver, but it could be done. Indeed, the people who live near the Maywood, N.J., refuse impoundments - materials characterized as much less harmful than what Cotter admits to having in its ponds - found a way to get rid of the material. This step would require help from U.S. representatives and senators, but it could be done.

As long as the site is there, and as long as it is designated to take certain radioactive materials, someone somewhere - be it General Atomics or another Superfund site - will try to send material there that the community would rather not have. Whether the issue is high-level or low-level wastes, the nuclear industry has produced much more than anyone knows what to do with. Cañon City residents will be much safer if the Cotter impoundments are not there.

A serious question already has been raised by federal agencies about whether the Department of Energy will accept the Cotter site when it is decommissioned. There already may be materials in the ponds that would force the state to take over the site for the rest of time. For the long-term good of state taxpayers, the problem must be solved once and for all.

While the company has provided good-paying jobs in Cañon City, it's unclear how many high-paying jobs have been lost when companies refused to locate their operations and employees in a town with a Superfund site. Cañon City has much to offer and the question has to be asked and answered: Is there something that has held back the community from taking its place among similar Colorado towns that have achieved success in economic development?

A shutdown of the mill might cause an economic blip, but since mining and milling account for only 2 percent of the local economy and because a cleanup would require high-

paying jobs for five to 10 years, the community has a good chance of being better off in both the short and long term.

A shutdown would establish that the people of Cañon City have value greater than the value of an industry that has polluted the environment. Shutting down the mill places the health and well being of the residents ahead of dollars and cents. The return on that investment - establishing the value of the people who live in Cañon City - will pay more dividends than Cotter ever has or could.

The community should step forward to examine the mill's relicensing. It should begin work now with legislators and U.S. representatives to take the steps necessary to remove the threat from Cañon City.

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