

Cotter at the Crossroads

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



Letters say school was not tested

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DENVER - A recently-discovered series of letters written 10 years ago indicate state health officials failed to conduct soil tests at McKinley Elementary School in Lincoln Park in spite of private 1992 tests indicating the school playground contained unsafe levels of uranium, lead and molybdenum.

The Canon City superintendent of schools will now ask for those tests.

Phil Stoffey, who has overseen the cleanup of the Lincoln Park Superfund site for the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment since 1988, said he walked around the school with a gamma detection device after receiving the reports but did not test for the metals.

"I'm unaware of any other tests," Stoffey said, adding that the Geiger-counter-type test was part of a program in which all the intersections in the Superfund area were tested.

Stoffey said the device, which indicated uranium levels within the safe range at the school, could not have measured alpha or beta radiation, lead or molybdenum. He said he "doesn't remember any letters" informing the department of the private soil tests that showed high levels of contaminants.

A copy of that letter, however, shows it was sent to Stoffey - as well as health department officials Fred Dowsett and Robert Quillin - on Aug. 17, 1992. Quillin has since retired and Dowsett, who works in the department's hazardous materials division, said he doesn't remember the letter.

"I really did not have a whole lot of involvement with Cotter," Dowsett said. "If I got the letter I probably would have referred it back to Phil (Stoffey)."

Canon City School Superintendent Frank Cooper said he remembers receiving a later letter he now assumes came from the health department which gave the school grounds a clean bill of health, but he still wants to know if the health department's letter was accurate. Cooper said he is now looking for a copy of the letter.

"We looked at the letter to make sure there was nothing for us to be alarmed about," he said, adding that he didn't know the health department did not conduct soil tests for the metals.

The initial tests on the school grounds, conducted by Glenn Miller Consulting in Elizabeth and analyzed by Hazen Laboratories in 1992, indicated uranium levels four times the amount of naturally-occurring radiation and indicated molybdenum levels 21 times the natural level. The same test indicated lead levels 3.75 times the natural background. The tests showed a uranium level of four parts per million, molybdenum at 41 ppm and lead at 75 ppm.

Miller was contracted to perform the tests by a Colorado Springs law firm that at the time was representing several Lincoln Park residents in a lawsuit against Cotter. According to a letter sent by attorney Rebecca Lorenz to the school district on Aug. 20, 1992, the superintendent agreed to the tests after requests from parents at the school. Lorenz has confirmed that she wrote the letter.

Three days before that letter was sent, Lorenz sent a similar letter to the health department. She also sent a letter to the Environmental Protection Agency. The EPA responded that it referred the matter "to our counterparts" at the state health department.

Lorenz' letter to the school district warned that exposure to lead can be harmful to young children.

Cooper said school officials assumed the site was safe after receiving the health department letter, but now wants to know more.

"I want to make sure the message we received is correct," he said. "I haven't yet spoken to the school board but, speaking for myself, I want to find out. I know we were told we were within the safe range at the time."

Cooper said he plans to contact state health officials regarding possible new testing of the school grounds. The department last week announced it will soon conduct tests for plutonium and other contaminants at about 20 locations in the Lincoln Park area.

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