

Cotter at the Crossroads

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



Commentary

Prevent Cotter from collecting nuclear castoffs

The Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment should not permit the Cotter Corporation to turn the mill site into a dump for radioactive and contaminated materials found elsewhere in Colorado or the nation.

Cotter would like to receive and dispose of 470,000 tons of contaminated soil from Maywood, N.J. It already has received contaminated materials from other Superfund sites.

It has, for example, 3,120 drums of calcium fluoride on the site that it received from Honeywell. In the 17 months since the shipments concluded, the company still hasn't figured out how to process the material and, according to a letter from the Environmental Protection Agency dated Sept. 13, is not even able to open the drums.

The public record - lawsuits filed against the company (and won), documentation at the state health department, the EPA, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission and elsewhere - are clear evidence that the company has been unable to control what it already has at the site. It should not be permitted to bring in more.

Of great concern to Cañon City specifically and Colorado generally is whether the site is suitable for disposal of radioactive and hazardous materials.

Cotter's location, just south of a populated area and up hill from the city and the Arkansas River, also sits atop a maze of abandoned coal mines through which spilled or leaked contaminants could flow who knows where.

The location probably was not suitable 40 years ago, and it certainly isn't today.

It was never envisioned at the time that Cañon City recruited the mill's founders or in recent years that the site would become home to the castoffs of the nuclear age. Material not suitable for storage or disposal in populated areas of New Jersey, New York, Oklahoma, Illinois and elsewhere is not suitable for disposal in Cañon City's backyard.

The health department must do all that it can to prevent the conversion of the mill site into a waste dump. Barring that, the governor and legislature must step in to prevent this travesty from occurring.