

Cotter at the Crossroads

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



Kerry Smith, president of the PACE workers International local 5-844 union at the Cotter Corp., says he has no qualms about working at the mill and is more than comfortable with Cotter's safety record. Times-Call /Jeff Haller

Specialist says safety has always been priority at Cotter

By Eric Frankowski

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CA ON CITY - After eight years on active duty in the Air Force and another 20 working as a civilian contractor for the military, Kerry Smith is more than familiar with the rigors of regulation and procedure.

For the past three years, he has been working as an instrumentation specialist and electrician at Cotter Corp.'s uranium mill in Ca on City.

A proposal to use the mill as a disposal site for radioactive waste from Maywood, N.J., Superfund cleanup, combined with safety and reporting violations issued by the state health department, have many in the community questioning Cotter's soundness.

But Smith said he has no qualms about working at the mill and is more than comfortable with Cotter's safety record.

"I've never had any problems with any of the safety equipment," Smith said. "Anything we need, we get it without question immediately."

Like any industrial job, he said, there are hazards, but the training, equipment and procedures Cotter has in place surpass the status quo.

"It's hard work," he said. "It's demanding. You have to keep your wits about you because it's dangerous. But the hazards are no different than you would find in any industrial setting.

"We deal with acids and caustics, things like anhydrous ammonia. But there are strict policies on safety, and if you follow the rules, you're going to limit your exposure."

In April, the state health department's Laboratory and Radiation Services Division cited Cotter for 16 violations, including lack of documentation on radiation doses to workers, "deficiencies which have significant potential health impacts," insufficient bioassays, and incomplete records.

The violations, said LARS program manager Jake Jacobi, "indicate a serious and substantial breakdown in the management oversight of this facility."

Smith is aware of the violations, but said they are insignificant and really have no bearing on true worker safety and protection.

Most of the violations, he said, involve paperwork, not actual risk. And although he understands the need for the documentation, he said the company "is doing what needs to be done to keep people safe."

"If there's ever any doubt that a place is close to being near the exposure limit, there's no questions, we put on respirators," Smith said. "We always err on the side of caution."

He finds it irrational that people are complaining about Cotter being paid to accept soil that is less radioactive than what's already in the mill's tailings ponds.

"When I heard the Maywood soil was coming in, I went right to the company management and asked them, 'What are you guys bringing in here?'" Smith said. "I was given all the data and material, and I made my own decisions about it. The soil is pretty comparable to the kind of soil you could dig up around town."

"I really believe the mill is out there because they want to process material, and not because some corporate honcho living somewhere else wants to turn it into a waste dump."

He also knows the mill's future depends in large part on Cotter taking in the Maywood soil so that the company will have the capital to finish developing a new chemical circuit to extract zirconium from uranium ore.

That would mean the difference between a skeleton crew of several dozen and full-staffing of perhaps 200. Jobs that pay as well as \$9 or \$10 an hour are hard to come by in Cañon City, Smith said, and a fully operational mill would help a lot of families.

In the end, Smith said he would just like critics of his employer to take a hard look at the facts and understand that there are competent people who are also part of the community working at the mill.

"I don't like the comments that we're the criminal element and things like that," Smith said. "We're just people out there trying to make a living. And we are concerned about safety."

"I've got two kids who live in Cañon City. My son's 25 and my daughter's 29, and I've got a 14-month-old grandson. They live here and I would never want to see anything happen to the community that would harm them."

Eric Frankowski can be reached at 303-776-2244, Ext. 319, or by e-mail at efrankowski@times-call.com.

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