

## Cotter at the Crossroads

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



The Cotter plant is seen above one of the tailings ponds recently. Daily Record News Group/Jeff Haller

## The Cotter Timeline

1953 - Prospectors find uranium in Fremont County, 35 miles northwest of Cañon City.

July 1954 - U.S. House of Representatives approves bill to facilitate uranium mining on public lands in Utah, New Mexico, and Colorado.

1955 - Cañon City Chamber of Commerce sends a mineral survey to mining corporations to lure business to the area.

1956 - Cotter Corp. founded in Roswell, N.M. The company moves a survey branch to Cañon City.

May 1957 - Cotter signs a contract with the Atomic Energy Commission for a uranium pilot mill south of Cañon City.

February 1958 - Cotter notifies the Atomic Energy Commission it will build a pilot mill, with an initial capacity of processing 50 tons of ore per day.

July 1958 - Construction completed in 63 days. The mill has a 72-ton capacity and employs 35.

Aug. 14, 1958 - After processing 1,400 pounds of uranium oxide, or yellow cake, from 500 tons of ore, Cotter sends its first shipment to the AEC in Grand Junction.

September 1958 - Cotter's reaches full production capacity of 72 tons of ore per day, but pushes the AEC for a 200-ton-per-day plant.

Nov. 7, 1958 - The Cotter mill is formally dedicated.

August 1959 - After negotiations with the city, a new water line is installed to the mill, meaning Cotter no longer has to haul in 50,000 gallons of water a day by tanker.

November 1959 - Construction begins on Cotter's \$1.25 million expansion to 200 tons per day.

March 1960 - The AEC and Cotter sign a contract for a full-scale, 200-ton uranium mill.

1964 - The AEC opens the uranium market up to private enterprise.

January 1965 - Cotter lays off 138 workers.

February 1965 - Cotter and two other uranium firms file suit against the AEC for not allowing them to continue fulfilling government contracts for another two years through the federal stretch-out program. Cotter claims the AEC permitted it to operate at no more than 72 percent capacity while other mills ran at 110 percent. The plaintiffs lose their case and Cotter is forced to close its doors.

May 1966 - Cotter plans to reopen after negotiating to supply uranium to several users. Also, the company buys the Schwartzwalder mine near Golden as a direct source of ore for its mill.

1967-1968 - The mill adds a 100-ton-per-day acid leach circuit.

1968 - Colorado becomes an "agreement state" and assumes responsibility for regulating nuclear facilities from the AEC.

1968-1971 - Cotter receives up to 110,000 tons of tailings containing radioactive residue from the Manhattan Project. The material is shipped to the mill in open rail cars.

January 1970 - Cañon City Councilman Robert Benson accuses Cotter of "serious air pollution."

Jan. 13, 1970 - Residents establish a community Anti-Pollution Committee.

Jan. 19, 1970 - Canon City added to a list of Colorado cities that will be examined to make sure uranium tailings haven't been used as fill for houses.

1971-1973 - Cotter builds two lined tailings ponds covering more than 13 acres. Also, the mill begins extracting molybdenum.

May 1974 - Electric giant Commonwealth Edison Co. of Chicago buys Cotter. The plant has 81 people on its payroll.

April 1978 - The Colorado Department of Health discovers elevated levels of uranium and possibly toxic chemicals that are associated with milling in nearby aquifers.

June 1978 - Cotter's workforce numbers 148, second only to the state prisons as an economic force in Cañon City. The mill is capable of processing 400 tons of ore a day.

April 1979 - State health officials ignore EPA recommendations and renew Cotter's operating license. Residents near Cotter and Lincoln Park had asked for a two-year delay in the decision to allow the county to vote on the matter.

1979 - Cotter completes its new mill and begins transferring the contents of its old, unlined tailings ponds into new, clay- and rubber-lined impoundments.

May 1979 - The state permits Cotter to use its new facility, but will continue to monitor groundwater contamination.

January 1980 - Federal Mine Health and Safety Administration cites Cotter for vanadium poisoning but does not take any punitive measures.

September 1980 - Colorado Bureau of Investigations issues a report blasting Cotter's safety record, but the company won't be prosecuted because of a statute of limitations expiration.

November 1980 - Cañon City Citizens Committee for a Healthy Environment meets for the first time.

1980-1983 - After a resident discovers radioactivity on property in Maywood, N.J. the state, DOE and EPA conduct tests that confirm contamination in excess of state and federal guidelines.

September 1983 - The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency designates the Maywood Chemical Co. and surrounding residential areas in Bergen County, N.J. as a Superfund site.

October 1983 - The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services releases a health assessment of Lincoln Park saying 36 wells exceeded limits for certain chemicals.

December 1983 - The Colorado Attorney General files a \$50 million lawsuit against Cotter, accusing the company of contaminating natural resources.

September 1984 - The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency designates the Lincoln Park area as a Superfund site.

February 1985 - Monitoring wells drilled in Lincoln Park to detect groundwater contamination levels.

April 1986 - Negotiations delay the State vs. Cotter trial.

October 1986 - State health officials announce that groundwater in Lincoln Park is contaminated 12 to 17 times beyond safe drinking limits. A Remedial Action Plan calls for Cotter to pay \$11 million in fines instead of the \$50 million sought.

December 1987 - Cotter agrees to an out-of-court settlement in the state lawsuit.

April 1988 - Court approves Cotter clean-up plan.

August 1989 - Lincoln Park residents file a \$550 million civil suit against Cotter, asking for \$300 million in actual damages and \$200 million in punitive damages. The suit also names the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railway and seeks \$50 million in damages for radioactive spills at two loading sites in and south of Cañon City.

December 1990 - Judge Zita Weinshienk denies class-action status for the suit from Lincoln Park residents.

1994 - The \$550 million case is settled. Five plaintiffs receive a judgment in their favor. A few others settle out of court and the settlements are sealed.

July 1998 - State health officials begin a review of Cotter's application to renew its radioactive materials license.

December 1999 - Cotter outlines a new plan to stop leakage of contaminated water under a flood-control dam.

February 2000 - City Council announces that it doesn't want

the contaminated waste from the Shattuck Superfund site in Denver.

February 2000 - La Jolla, Calif.-based General Atomics buys Cotter from the Commonwealth Edison Co.

August 2000 - Cotter submits a bid to accept radioactive thorium tailings from a Maywood, N.J. Superfund site.

Dec. 31, 2000 - Cotter files with state health department for renewal of its operating license.

July 2001 - Cañon City Chamber of Commerce names Cotter as its business of the year.

2001 - Dodge case decided against Cotter and \$16 million, plus interest, is awarded. Cotter appeals.

February 2002 - Cotter officials announces they will receive 270,000 tons of Maywood waste.

April 2002 - The Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment cites Cotter with 16 violations of its license.

April 2002 - Gov. Bill Owens signs an emergency bill into law that requires an environmental assessment and state health department review before out-of-state radioactive waste can be shipped into Colorado.

May 2002 - Cotter lays off 45 employees, nearly 40 percent of its workforce.

July 9, 2002 - State health department suspends Cotter from accepting any more shipments of ore until violations are addressed.

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