

DIVISION OF RECLAMATION, MINING AND SAFETY

Department of Natural Resources

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State mining agency rejects uranium cleanup plan

Cotter Corp. told to take immediate action on contaminated groundwater

DENVER, Colo. – The Division of Reclamation Mining and Safety has told a Denver company to take action as soon as possible to stop contamination from a non-operational Jefferson County uranium mine from leaking into an important metro-area drinking water reservoir.

On Wednesday, DRMS notified Denver-based Cotter Corporation that the revised Environmental Protection Plan Cotter submitted on April 19 had been rejected because agency staff did not believe the plan would prevent uranium contamination from entering Ralston Reservoir. The agency said it would begin enforcement proceedings against the company.

“Protecting the public and drinking water supplies is our top priority,” said Loretta Piñeda, director of DRMS. “We have concluded that Cotter’s plan will not accomplish the goal of protecting Ralston Reservoir. We’ve directed Cotter to resume water treatment and plans must be provided to us within two weeks.”

High concentrations of uranium from the Schwartzwald Mine have been documented in Ralston Creek. Ralston Creek feeds Ralston Reservoir, a drinking water supply source for several municipal water providers including Denver Water and the City of Arvada. Treatment systems operated by these utilities are presently removing uranium from water delivered to customers. However, state law requires mine owners to prevent mine-related impacts to public drinking water systems.

In a letter sent to Cotter officials, DRMS directed the company to reinitiate water treatment to remove pollution from the mine and to coordinate with the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment to ensure that water quality standards are being met. The company shut down a treatment plant at the site, which is regulated by CDPHE, in 2002.

DRMS also directed Cotter to reduce the level of contaminated groundwater inside the mine by more than 500 feet and maintain it at that level so that it does not flow into Ralston Creek. In addition, the agency said Cotter must set aside sufficient funding to accomplish these goals.

Agency officials found a number of serious deficiencies with Cotter's Environmental Protection Plan, which proposed to use a man-made wetland and a chemically active filtration barrier to capture uranium leaking from the mine into the creek. DRMS rejected the plan and gave Cotter until August 1 to submit a new plan.

The Schwartzwalder mine operated from 1953 until May 2000. A radioactive materials permit issued by CDPHE regulates an inactive processing facility associated with the Schwartzwalder mine.

In September 2009, Cotter submitted a previous version of the Environmental Protection Plan which DRMS deemed to be deficient.

Colorado law requires all uranium mines to be regulated as a Designated Mining Operation, which provides protection of human health, property and the environment from designated chemicals, toxic or acid-forming materials or acid mine drainage associated with the operation.

During the next month, DRMS will pursue an enforcement action to address apparent mine-related impacts to Ralston Creek. The Mined land Reclamation Board will hold a formal public hearing to review the enforcement action.

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A copy of the DRMS letter may be obtained at: <http://dnr.state.co.us/>