

CENTRAL BASIN MUNICIPAL WATER DISTRICT **APRIL 11, 2005 - Water Resources**
Cole, Vasquez
APRIL 25, 2005 - Board Meeting
Prepared by: Cheryl Ross
Submitted by: Richard Nagel
Approved by: Richard Nagel

INFORMATION CALENDAR

ATLAS URANIUM TAILINGS PILE

SUMMARY:

Just north of Moab, Utah, the country's largest deposit of high-grade uranium was milled from 1956 through 1984. Tailings laced with uranium, radon, ammonia, arsenic, mercury, lead and other contaminants were deposited in unlined ponds on a floodplain just 750 feet from the Colorado River. Twelve-thirteen million tons of tailings with the consistency of toothpaste accumulated over the decades covering 130 acres to a depth of about 100 feet. Operations ceased in 1984 and site cleanup negotiations began between Atlas Corporation, the owners, and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission.

Atlas Corporation declared bankruptcy over costly remediation options in the late 1990's. Federal legislation in 2000 directed the Department of Energy (DOE) to move the pile and clean up the groundwater. The project has languished since then with minimal funding or progress. Numerous options were investigated over the past five years that include capping the site with a liner, burying it, or moving it by truck, rail or pipeline to a more secure and permanent location. State and federal officials, water agencies from western states, the federal EPA, and environmental groups have been supporting the removal option for years. DOE's November 2004 draft environmental study proposed several alternatives, including a "no-action" alternative. The DOE did not identify any "preferred" solution, opening up full debate during the comment period. The result was thousands of concerned comments, including a well-documented letter from MWD. DOE will review all the comments and issue a final environmental statement this summer, with the White House making the final decision.

Rough DOE numbers show that capping the pile would cost about \$160 million. Removal of the pile may take over eight years at well over \$400 million and groundwater cleanup would take an additional 80 years. The DOE has moved over 20 radioactive tailings sites around country to more secure locations, but this is the largest and costliest yet.

The tailings pile currently leaches about 15,000 gallons of contaminants into the Colorado River each day, down from as high as 26,000 gallons per day. Federal officials say there is no immediate threat to downstream drinking water supplies due to the dilution from the river, although water officials aren't convinced. Federal and state geologic studies demonstrated that the Colorado River could produce catastrophic flooding or migrate under the tailings site, potentially releasing the entire pile into the river.

FISCAL IMPACTS:

None.

ENVIRONMENTAL COMPLIANCE:

Long-term source water quality for drinking and agriculture could be affected for as many as 26 million people in four western states.

COMMITTEE STATUS:

This item was reviewed by the Water Resources Committee on April 11, 2005 and was agendaized to the April 25, 2005 Board meeting as information for discussion.

RECOMMENDED MOTION:

This item is for information only.

LIST OF EXHIBITS:

Exhibit "A" - Information Package from Grand County, Utah
Exhibit "B" - MWD's Comment Letter to the DOE Draft EIS