

Bill Hedden Commentary

This is Bill Hedden, I'm the executive director of the Grand Canyon Trust, a regional conservation group with offices in southern Utah and Flagstaff, Arizona. I would like to talk about an issue that I've been working on for the last decade that I think should be of concern to everyone who cares about the Colorado River.

The U.S. Department of Energy will make a decision sometime early this Spring about the fate of a twelve million ton pile of radioactive uranium mill wastes that sit in the flood plain of the Colorado River in Moab, Utah.

The Department of Energy has already cleaned up ten uranium mill waste piles that were along the Colorado and its tributaries and every one of those was moved to a safer location. The pile at Moab is the largest by far, more than twice as large as any of the others and it is more contaminating to the river than all of the others combined.

However, in order to save money during these times of budget crises, the Department of Energy is considering leaving these tailings where they are and simply putting a cap over them which will do nothing to stop their constant daily discharge into the Colorado River. Nor will the cap do anything to save them when the Colorado River floods through that site. Now this is not wild speculation, the river has routinely flooded there, they sit on an alluvial fan and the United States Geological Survey and the State of Utah have confirmed that the tailings pile will be washed into the Colorado River sometime, either tomorrow or well within the next thousand years if they're left there.

Meanwhile, they continue to leak a deadly brew of arsenic and uranium and cadmium and selenium and nitrates and sulfates into the river every day.

There are, nearby, two excellent sites that the Department of Energy has compared with this option of capping in place and found that indeed, they would provide a perfect answer to isolating the waste from the environment for the very long haul without the need for any ongoing maintenance.

So it's a very stark choice between leaving the wastes where they will continue to contaminate the water supply for 26 million people and threaten those water supplies with catastrophic failure or moving them to where they should be, where they can be permanently kept away from the environment.

We need to contact our governors and senators to add our voices to the governors of Utah, New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada and California who have already asked that these be moved. And you can get the information about your senator by going to the website www.senate.gov and tell the Department of Energy in no uncertain terms that the water supply for the southwestern United States is far too precious to threaten with the continued presence of these uranium mill wastes on the riverbank. Thank you.