



UNITED STATES
ATOMIC ENERGY COMMISSION
WASHINGTON, D. C.

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GENERAL INVESTIGATION

July 27, 1959

Dear Mr. President:

At your press and radio conference on July 15, one of the correspondents asked a question regarding the possible health hazards of waste material being discharged by a uranium processing mill. This question apparently referred to the Animas River, in Colorado and New Mexico, into which one of the uranium processing mills discharges effluent.

Inspections by the Commission and other studies, in cooperation with the States and with the United States Public Health Services have indicated that the effluent discharged into the Animas River contains radium in excess of the permissible concentrations established by AEC regulations. This does not mean that there is an immediate health hazard.

An individual could for a period of 70 years continuously and exclusively consume water containing maximum permissible concentrations of radium allowed by present Atomic Energy Commission regulations before he would have taken radium into his body in excess of the recommendations of the National Committee on Radiation Protection. Concentrations measured downstream during the past year in the Animas River water at several points of utilization showed a maximum of about 2 1/2 times the maximum permissible concentrations. An individual could continuously and exclusively consume water at these concentrations for 50 years before receiving radium into his body from this source in excess of recommendations of the National Committee on Radiation Protection. Therefore, the AEC believes that there is no immediate radiation hazard to the public health in this mill effluent situation. Secretary Boardman expressed the view, in his press conference on July 14, that the population of the area had not ingested sufficient amounts of radioactive material to cause detectable health damage.

However, it is necessary to reduce the concentrations of radium in the river to permissible limits. On May 22 of this year, on the basis of earlier inspections and studies, the AEC issued an order to the uranium mill directing it to report the measures it will take to control the effluent. The company has replied describing the action that is being taken.

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Among other measures, the company has instituted improved control procedures for the discharge of effluent into the river. This has resulted in a substantial reduction of the solid radioactive waste discharged into the river. In addition, the company put into operation on July 1, 1959, two settling ponds for removal of solid waste and toxic chemicals and a process for removal of soluble radioactive materials.

In addition to the water effluent problem, there is a problem of controlling uranium dust in some work areas inside the mill. In response to the Commission's order of May 22, which also required the mill to report the immediate steps it would take to reduce dust concentrations, the mill has made equipment modifications at various points in the mill. These include the installation of mist sprays to wet down uranium ore to reduce dust, air ducts to remove dust from the immediate point of release, dust collectors to entrap dust, and improved ventilation equipment. The mill is redesigning certain equipment used in the production of uranium concentrates to further reduce the dust problem.

The Commission will continue its inspections to make sure that these and, if necessary, other corrective actions are effective in reducing the concentrations of radioactivity in the river to permissible limits and in making necessary reductions in the concentrations of dust within the mill.

The Commission has also issued orders to other mills requiring them to maintain survey programs of their water effluent and dust concentrations and to report corrective steps to be taken where necessary.

There is no indication that the operation of the mill creates a problem of radioactive contamination of the air outside the mill area.

The disappearance of fish from the Animas River, referred to by the correspondent, is due to toxic chemicals and not radioactivity.

Should there be other information you desire on the subject, I shall be most pleased to provide it.

Respectfully yours,

John A. McCone

The President
The White House
Washington, D. C.