

Federal funds may benefit Lakeview site

Radioactive tailings pose disposal problem

By CATHERINE SIEGNER
Of the Emerald

A few miles north of the town of Lakeview in southeastern Oregon, 30 acres of glistening white sand lies beneath waving grass and behind a six-foot fence a sign reads: "Caution — Radioactive Material."

The "sand" is really radioactive tailings from an abandoned uranium mill nearby. The pile emits about 54 microrems of radioactivity per hour. That results in 500 millirems per year — the maximum limit allowed by law.

Congress passed a law in Oc-

tober targeting federal funds for cleaning up some 18 such sites in Pennsylvania, Colorado, New Mexico, Wyoming, Arizona, Texas, Idaho, Utah and Oregon.

The bill, passed by the House, calls for 90 percent federal funding for the projects. The Senate version directs the federal government to pick up the whole tab — estimated at \$200 million.

Environmental impact statements would have to be done on the cleanup operations, which would involve covering the tailings with several feet of dirt and erecting fences to keep unsuspecting persons away.

Michal Pollock, environmental specialist for the state Department of Energy, says a legislative act last session poses a dilemma to the cleanup plans.

"The Oregon law says you can't dispose of radioactive materials in the state. We're now involved in a rule-making procedure to define 'radioactive materials.' If we adopt new rules, all disposal would be illegal," Pollock says.

The Lakeview site is one of many where uranium ore was mined from 1945 to 1960, first from shafts and later from an open pit. The uranium — about one-

tenth of one percent of the ore — was extracted through a grinding and dissolving process and used for military weapons. The tailings were left.

The mill stopped operations in 1961 and the tailings were used by locals for motorcycle practice. Finally, in 1975, the state Health Division contacted the mill owners — ARCO — and suggested they clean up the site.

"We said that under current conditions, the tailings posed a health hazard," recalls Marshall Parrott, manager of radiation control for the Health Division. "The

mill was dismantled and hauled off to Texas. Two to three feet of compacted earth was bulldozed over the tailings and the fence was put up. It must have cost ARCO \$300,000."

The federal government will find the Lakeview site is a piece of cake compared to other areas. In Grand Junction, Col., tailings were used for land fill at construction sites, and some wound up in kids' sandboxes.

In downtown Salt Lake City, a firehouse was built over a pile of tailings. Firemen were later exposed to high levels of radon gas.

"The federal project will stabilize tailings in a method appropriate to the site," Pollock says. "The Salt Lake City site is totally inappropriate. The pile is right in the middle of a populated area."

Pollock says there is still uranium ore at the Lakeview mill. "There's prospecting being done around Lakeview and further east."

Parrott says the new federal legislation may mean ARCO will be paid for the cleanup it has already done, and that the Lakeview site may not even need further work.

"I've seen some of the other places. The one in New Mexico is the toughest one to handle. Lakeview is the easiest one of all to take care of," he says.

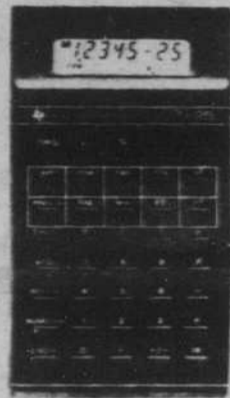
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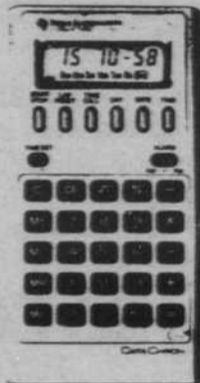
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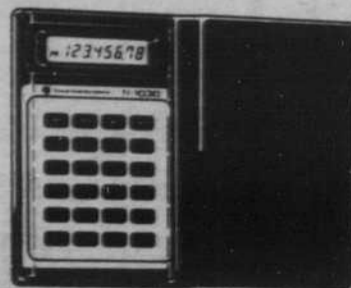
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