

“Pacifying the Public”

By Charmaine White Face ©

The USDA Forest Service from Custer National Forest out of Billings, MT, is responsible for a large area in the Northwestern corner of South Dakota. The Cave Hills and Slim Buttes area exhibits some of the most unique and beautiful landscapes in the state. This area also was used extensively in the 1960s for uranium mining, ...open-pit uranium mining. Unfortunately, at that time, there were no laws for reclamation, so 89 mines and prospects were left abandoned, according to information from the US Forest Service.

On Nov. 13, 2007, in the nearest community to the Cave Hills area, a blink of an eye place known as Ludlow, the Forest Service held an open house “to update the public on the activities happening at the site.” It was advertised in the regions’ daily newspaper a few times, and flyers were sent to interested individuals.

There is a federal law called the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation and Liability Act, or CERCLA. The Forest Service has a CERCLA program that “cleans up hazardous substances from abandoned mine lands and other sites to protect human health and the environment (such as watershed soil, water, and vegetation).” This sounds excellent, however, the Forest Service can only do this if they have enough money, or there is a Potentially Responsible Party. In this case, the Potentially Responsible Party is Tronox Worldwide LLC, formerly Kerr-McGee Corporation, which mined at least six of the bluffs in the North Cave Hills area at the Riley Pass site.

More than 150 acres were disturbed from 1962-64 when Tronox pushed a million plus cubic yards of overburden over the edges of the rimrocks surrounding the plateau at the Riley Pass site, spewing radioactive dust and destroying hundreds of petroglyphs, burials and sites sacred to many Native American nations. From these activities more than 28,000 tons of ore was removed which produced 150,000 pounds of uranium. The wastes left behind included poisonous arsenic, molybdenum which harms cattle, and the highly radioactive thorium, not to mention other uranium decay products such as radium, and radon. The radon gas alone, at that time and today, is carried for hundreds of miles in the air and causes lung cancer.

With the release of all these radioactive substances into the environment for more than 40 years, the Forest Service reached a settlement agreement with Tronox who is developing reclamation plans only for Bluff B. One of the disturbing statements used in the 38 page settlement agreement was: "Respondent shall prepare, perform and submit to the Forest Service for review and approval the non-time critical removal action..." Probably after more than 40 years of allowing these radioactive contaminants to harm the environment, including the human beings downwind and down stream, then it seems to be "non-time critical." Yet, it would seem that the clean-up would be 'more' time critical in order to stop the environmental and human health effects as soon as possible.

Bluff B was chosen since tests have shown it contains the highest amount of gamma radiation. This is the deadliest form of nuclear radiation in comparison with alpha and beta radiation which is also found at the Riley Pass site. The material containing the most gamma radiation will be scooped up into "containment cells." In other words, this radioactive material will be wrapped up like a burrito in a manmade synthetic wrapper. How long the wrapper will hold the material remains to be seen, since uranium can take billions of years to decay eventually to its non-radioactive final self while the wrapper will fall apart long before the uranium is finished. The reclamation plans are only for one bluff at the Riley Pass site. This raises the question, what about the other 88 mines? Are all 89 mines going to be reclaimed? Or is only one bluff of one mine going to be reclaimed?

When I asked this question of Laurie Walters-Clark, the USFS On-Scene Coordinator, she quickly deflected the question and never gave an answer. However, there is another entity watching this whole course of action, a Quality Assurance body called Millennium Science and Engineering, Inc. Maybe it's because they are the watchdog that I was able to get a more honest answer. To the question of: "When will all 89 mines be cleaned up?" The answer from MSE was: "Not in your lifetime."

It wasn't an answer I wanted to hear. I kept thinking of all the people in the village of Bullhead, 100 miles away, who are downstream from these mines. I kept thinking of the abandoned mines just west of the Pine Ridge Reservation. I kept thinking of all the people in South Dakota affected by the radioactive dust and radon gas as the winds blow across this northwest corner to the rest of the state. The answer was an honest answer and one that treated me like an intelligent, responsible adult. Millennium Science and Engineering, Inc, should be proud that they have employees who are not afraid to give an honest answer.

After going through the large amount of written material made available on the plan, my

conclusion was that this massive amount of paperwork is only a “pacifier for the public.” It is an insult to the courage and the right of the people living downwind and downstream from these mines to be duped into believing that the situation is being remedied when work will only be completed on one bluff of one mine with the result of that work not guaranteed.

People have the right to know when something harmful is, or has been coming to them. With the proper information, then choices can be made to remain and take chances with the 'known' danger, to move to a different location, or to do something to help lessen the danger.

It is estimated that there are more than 1,000 abandoned uranium mines located in this region which also includes the southern Black Hills in South Dakota, parts of Montana, and a major portion of Wyoming. How much radioactive dust has been carried by the wind from all these mines in the past 40 years? How much radioactive runoff from 40 years of rain and snow has collected in the Missouri River? What will it take to wake up the country and the world to this deadly “silent Chernobyl” in the middle of the United States?

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