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NRC ISSUES FINAL ENVIRONMENTAL STATEMENT
ON URANIUM MILL TAILINGS PILE IN UTAH

A proposal by the Atlas Corporation to leave its uranium mill tailings pile permanently in place near Moab, Utah, was found environmentally acceptable by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission if the company meets a number of specific requirements from the NRC and the Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and if it can show that ammonia levels in the Colorado River will be reduced to levels specified by the FWS.

The finding was contained in a Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) issued by the NRC.

The tailings pile resulted from operations of a uranium mill at the Moab site from 1956 until 1984. The facility has been owned by Atlas since 1962. Uranium is no longer processed at the site, and the mill has been dismantled except for one building.

The Atlas proposal includes (1) re-grading the tailings to enhance draining off the pile and (2) installing an earth and rock cover system over the pile. This cover system is intended to minimize radon escape, infiltration of rain water into the tailings (thus minimizing infiltration of tailings contaminants into the groundwater), and tailings erosion potentially caused by surface runoff from rain or flooding of the Colorado River.

The NRC issued a draft environmental impact statement on the proposed on-site disposal for public comment in January 1996 and held public meetings in Moab in April 1994, February 1996 and September 1998 to discuss the proposal. Copies of public comments and NRC responses to them are included as appendices to the FEIS.

As required by the Endangered Species Act, the agency also consulted with the FWS concerning the proposed onsite tailings stabilization. In a Final Biological Opinion, FWS concluded that the proposal would jeopardize the continued existence of four endangered fish species. To avoid the likelihood of this jeopardy, the FWS developed reasonable and prudent alternatives that are focused on expediting cleanup of the groundwater and that identify the ammonia concentrations in the Colorado River that are needed to avoid future jeopardy to endangered fish. If the NRC approves the Atlas proposal, it will require the company to meet the conditions specified in the FWS opinion.

Significant additional NRC requirements that would be imposed if the agency approves the Atlas plant would include analyses to show that ammonia concentrations in the Colorado River will be reduced to the levels identified by the FWS and more expeditious cleanup of the groundwater. Other requirements would include minimization of dust emissions; submission of a spill prevention plan and an erosion control plan for NRC approval; interception and storage

of contaminant-laden runoff through use of adequate drainage control, retention and treatment ponds, silt fences, and other means as necessary; and avoidance of major earthmoving operations during periods of high thunderstorm potential when feasible.

The NRC also issued a final technical evaluation report in March 1997 on the safety aspects of the company's proposal to dispose of the mill tailings on site.

When printed copies of the FEIS are available (expected within several weeks), copies will be sent to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). The NRC can make no decision on the pending Atlas request for a license amendment to permit stabilization of tailings on site until 30 days after publication by EPA of a Federal Register notice stating that the FEIS has been filed with EPA.

A copy of the "Final Environmental Impact Statement Related to Reclamation of the Uranium Mill Tailings at the Atlas Site, Moab, Utah," document number NUREG-1531, will be sent to the Grand County Public Library, 25 South 100 East, Moab. A copy will also be available for review and copying at the NRC Public Document Room, 2120 L Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20555; telephone 202/634-3273.

Copies of the document will be available for purchase from the Government Printing Office, P.O. Box 37082, Washington, DC 20402-9328.

In addition, portions of the FEIS will be available on the NRC Internet web site at <http://www.nrc.gov/OPA/reports>.