

# Uranium Mill Shuts Down Again

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three months ago when its wastes area dam breached and released contaminants into a nearby river, was closed Friday by order of the New Mexico Environmental Improvement Division and the State Engineer's Office.

Cubia Clayton, assistant director of the EID, said it appeared the company had failed to maintain a 150-foot sand beach on the upstream crest of a dike holding wastes generated in the milling process.

According to the EID, a representative of the State Engineer's Office questioned the beach width Tuesday when he flew over the site on his way to a town meeting in Gallup. United Nuclear's operation was the topic of the meeting.

Upon later inspection, the EID said, engineers found the beach was 100

feet wide, rather than the required 150 feet.

United Nuclear spokesman Charles Ofelt said Jim Whiteman of the State Engineer's Office approved resumption of the mill operations Oct. 26 after deciding all the conditions he requested had been met, including the beach requirement. On Nov. 8, Ofelt said, State Engineer Steve Reynolds "verbally told United Nuclear that he believed a different point of measurement for determining the beach distance was appropriate."

Ofelt said the beach area has not changed since it was approved by both Whiteman and Gerald Stewart of the EID.

Health and Environment Secretary George Goldstein responded to news of the alleged beach violation with disappointment. "We have really bent over backward to reach a solution to the (Church Rock) situation," he said in a press statement. "The EID has

spent upward of 600 man-days with technical people working to correct the effects of the spill."

Clayton said the EID is also concerned that the Church Rock wastes site may be contaminating nearby ground water. The possible seepage of contaminants from the area is not necessarily related to the July 16 tailings dam break, Clayton added.

"We're not really sure how severe the pollution problem is," Clayton said. "If it is indeed a problem, it will require remedial measures above and beyond that of the tailings beach."

Ofelt said United Nuclear will "certainly be reviewing the (water) data with the EID."

He said the company can construct the beach area "as measured from the new points of reference" over the weekend and expects that "state approval for a second resumption of operations will be forthcoming before Sunday night."

Clayton said he thought the state engineer would probably be satisfied if the beach were widened. But he said the EID has "broader reservations" about resumption of the mill activity, including the water problem.

An order issued by the EID Friday requires the company to stop the discharge of wastes from the mill, submit a detailed report to the EID on why the beach was not maintained as promised and investigate possible seepage from the tailings area to ground water sources.

The water data was collected from EID monitoring wells near the site. Clayton said the EID is uncertain of the pollution source, but that water specialist John Dudley found elevated levels of sulfate and dissolved metal solids in the well. The water was also acidic, he said.

Clayton confirmed that the company had complied with the state order to halt operations. He also said the company had not filled its impoundment area too high with liquids, contrary to some reports.

United Nuclear's tailings dam breached July 16, sending about 94 million gallons of uranium mill process liquids and 1,100 tons of waste solids into the Puerco River that runs west of Church Rock.

## Church Rock N-Mill Again Closed Down

By DENISE TESSIER  
Journal Staff Writer

United Nuclear Corp.'s uranium mill at Church Rock has again been shut down by state order.

The state contends United Nuclear failed to comply with one of the conditions it promised to meet in order to gain approval for temporary operation of the mill.

The company says state inspectors approved the conditions at the Church Rock site Oct. 26, and that "There have been no changes in these conditions since that time."

United Nuclear also said, "This most recent change of position by the state is disappointing and will result in mill operations personnel being out of work for at least a short period of time."

The mill, which was first shut down

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The company was allowed to resume temporary operations after agreeing to certain state conditions and after a massive clean-up program that is ongoing.

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