

## **Moab Concerns: Moving contamination brings a new set of headaches**

**By Judy Fahys**  
**The Salt Lake Tribune**  
**Salt Lake Tribune**

MOAB - Rolling through the scenic redrock toward Arches National Park, carloads of tourists can't help but notice radiation-warning signs dotting the fence along Highway 191 and, behind it, people in white toxic cleanup suits.

Such a jarring scene soon might become real in this world-class tourist town, as the U.S. Energy Department begins cleaning up the old Atlas Corp. uranium mill site where a huge pile of contaminated tailings sits on the edge of the Colorado River. It's a problem local leaders have begun to grapple with now that the Energy Department has decided to haul the mill waste out of town.

Potential problems run the gamut. Will the hospitals be equipped to handle injured workers? Will there be affordable housing for the 150 workers and their families expected for the cleanup? Will tourists be scared away?

"It's a little overwhelming because there are all of these things we have to be paying attention to," said Joette Langianese, a Grand County councilwoman. "A strategic plan is something that needs to be developed."

It may begin as early as next month. The Energy Department intends to formalize its plan to move the tailings in a "record of decision" in a few weeks.

In April, following an act of Congress and years of studies and debating solutions, the Energy Department announced it would haul the uranium-contaminated dirt by rail to a new, specially designed landfill at

Crescent Junction, about 30 miles north of Moab. Moving the 130-acre pile is expected to take 10 years and roughly \$472 million.

The uranium-mill waste roughly equals six times the debris taken from the collapsed World Trade Center. Along with the mildly radioactive uranium, it contains ammonia and other pollutants - threats to several endangered species and the Colorado River water supply used by 25 million people downstream.

Utah Rep. Jim Matheson received a hearty thanks from local leaders who attended a "what-next" meeting here Tuesday. The Democratic congressman reminded the group it had been a multi-front, bipartisan effort.

"It was a result of a lot of people working together," he said. And even more collaboration is get the site cleaned up, Matheson added.

The Energy Department already has begun work on cleaning up contaminated water, according to project manager Don Metzler. Next year the Energy Department can start drawing up plans for a conveyor belt to move the tailings under the highway and for a rail spur that will be used to haul the waste to Crescent Junction.

That work depends on congressional funding. The community is sure to feel other impacts.

Loren Morton of the Utah Division of Radiation Control said minimizing traffic and noise will be an issue. So will controlling dust and mildly radioactive radon contained in it.

"Anywhere you do an earth-moving project, you have dust," he said. "Dust control is job one."

Ken Davey, coordinator of Moab Area Economic Development, is not as concerned as others about a housing shortage. "Our hope is that we can have Moab companies and local residents fill as many of those jobs as possible."