

Statement for the Record of Carmelo Melendez
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U.S. Department of Energy
Before the
Committee on Energy and Commerce
Subcommittee on Environment
U.S. House of Representatives
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Statement for the Record on H.R. 2278, the Responsible Disposal Reauthorization Act of 2017

Legacy waste cleanup is a top priority for the Department of Energy (“DOE” or the “Department”). Congress authorized the Cheney Disposal Cell near Grand Junction, Colorado (also known as the “Grand Junction, Colorado Disposal Site”) as part of the Uranium Mill Tailings Radiation Control Act of 1978, as amended (UMTRCA). Under Title I of UMTRCA, DOE remediated 22 inactive uranium milling sites, mostly in the western U.S., and over 5,000 “vicinity properties” containing “residual radioactive material” (i.e., uranium mill tailings and other wastes) resulting from the processing of uranium ore for sale to the United States as part of the early days of the Nation’s atomic energy program. The Cheney Disposal Cell initially contained residual radioactive material from a former uranium and vanadium milling site in Grand Junction, as well as a uranium milling site formerly located at the DOE Grand Junction Office. Under UMTRCA, it is also the only UMTRCA disposal cell that remains open to receive and dispose of additional residual radioactive material and related waste.

An important use of the Cheney Disposal Cell is the disposal of residual radioactive material from “vicinity properties.” Because of the sandy, fine grained, nature of the mill tailings material, it was used in concrete and mortar for foundations of buildings, including homes, before it was understood that radon emissions from the tailings could create a health hazard. Uranium mill tailings were also used as backfill around structures and utilities. As part of Title I, mill tailings material from over 4,000 vicinity properties around Grand Junction, Colorado were placed in the cell.

DOE expects that additional residual radioactive material, primarily from the City of Grand Junction will need to be disposed of in the Cheney Disposal Cell. Other similar waste will need to be disposed of in the Cheney Disposal Cell from the town of Monticello, Utah and some sites around Tuba City, Arizona within the Navajo Nation. Finally, DOE Office of Legacy Management operates groundwater treatment systems at several sites that will continue to generate waste eligible for disposal in the Cheney Disposal Cell. As recently as 2017, residual radioactive material from a decommissioned water treatment pond at the Title I, Durango, CO, Disposal Site was disposed of in the Cheney Disposal Cell.

The Cheney Disposal Cell contains about 4.5 million cubic yards of residual radioactive material and similar waste and receives approximately 2,700 cubic yards of additional waste per year. The Cheney Disposal Cell has sufficient space to receive an estimated 235,000 cubic yards, which represents 86 more years of operation at current rates.

DOE will continue to work closely with Tribal, local, state, and federal officials to ensure the protection of public health, safety, and the environment by moving contaminated materials away from public places. The Department of Energy looks forward to continuing to work with this subcommittee on responsible disposal management of the Nation's legacy sites.