

McKinley County Board of Commissioners supports Superfund NPL designation

Written by By Rick Abasta Sun Correspondent
Friday, 26 January 2018 10:18



The McKinley County Board of Commissioners convened Jan. 23 for their regular meeting.

Included on the agenda was a proposal to add the San Mateo Creek Basin uranium legacy site to the Superfund National Priorities List.

Brenda Cook, NPL coordinator for the U.S. EPA joined by phone, along with colleagues LaDonna Turner, site assessment manager, and Adam Wiesce, community involvement coordinator.

“I apologize for us not being able to come, but because of the [federal] shutdown, they cancelled all travel,” Cook said.

The San Mateo Creek Basin is approximately 321 square miles within the Rio San Jose drainage basin in McKinley and Cibola counties. Numerous legacy uranium mines with recorded production and four legacy uranium mills are located within the basin.

Thousands of exploratory boreholes provided a conduit between different aquifer formations in

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the area.

Turner explained the significance of this point at the meeting.

“More than 150 billion gallons of water were pumped from aquifers between 1956 and 1982,” Turner said.

She said uranium-mining operations have contributed to the degradation of groundwater quality for private wells whose guidelines are above federal drinking water standards.

“Mine discharge water infiltrated into the soils and sediment, significantly re-saturating portions of the shallow and underlying bedrock aquifers,” Turner said. “Tailing liquids from the former uranium mills also seeped downward into the shallow and underlying bedrock aquifers... Based on this information, we went to the state of New Mexico and asked them if they would consider looking at the Superfund as a potential way to cleanup the contamination.”

Phase I of the San Mateo Creek Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act investigations was completed in 2016 and focused on groundwater.

Phase II, involving fieldwork for the groundwater investigation, has been completed and a report is anticipated to be released in early 2018.

Numerous issues were discovered through these investigations.

Uranium and gross alpha were present in private drinking water wells at levels above drinking water standards. Documented contamination of the shallow aquifer included migration of hazardous substances to underlying aquifers.

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“The hazardous substances may impact public water supplies within the district in the future,” Turner said.

SEEKING SOLUTIONS

The benefits of getting added to the NPL are numerous.

“[NPL] will give us a mechanism to address large scale impact of mine water discharge. Currently, there’s no other state or federal program available,” Turner said.

Benefits include providing a comprehensive framework to address the groundwater contamination and allowing for multiple parties to participate in site investigation and clean up.

Currently, the site is being evaluated for NPL consideration. The EPA is seeking input from communities, including state and tribal governments. The EPA received a letter of support for the designation from the state of New Mexico Jan. 12.

“This site is a very complex site,” Turner said. “It will take many years before it goes from NPL phase to remedial phase. This is why we want to build strong community relations as we move forward because we know that we’ll be partners throughout this process.”

Wiesce expanded on potential next steps.

“The most important thing is to build a strong working partnership with the community,” he said. “We want to give the community opportunity to voice their concerns.”

He said the agency would look at newspaper, radio, email and postal service mediums to disseminate the information. Once consultation with the state and tribal communities is

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completed, publication of the proposed rule and public comment will be the next step.

Publication of the final rule and responses to the comments will follow.

“What are we looking at in terms of a timeline? How long from where we are to getting listed as a Superfund site to access funds and cleanup?” asked Commissioner Bill Lee.

Cook said the NPL is updated twice a year and the listing was recently updated on Jan. 18.

“The updates are six months apart, typically. More likely, the fall of 2018 will be the first opportunity to propose this site to the NPL. Approval would be until early the next year,” Cook said.

EDUCATION

The meeting continued on to cover other topics.

Superintendent Mike Hyatt of Gallup-McKinley County Schools presented information on the proposed McKinley Academy.

“In the last few years, we have outpaced the state with respect to math and reading improvement. Our students are performing better,” Hyatt said.

While the district is committed to student success, he said providing students with an education that is relevant for their lives and career goals is now a reality.

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“Our vision is to improve instruction by creating programs of study, pathways. It is a program of study with an outcome of certification, licensure, or dual credit,” he said. “We want to provide other opportunities, not just a diploma.”

GMCS currently has a 65 percent graduation rate. The superintendent noted that students on pathways education programs have a 20 percent greater chance at graduating.

The McKinley Academy is an early college pathway opportunity that would allow students to earn an associates degree while earning their high school diploma. GMCS is partnering with UNM-Gallup and Navajo Technical University.

“We will be providing transportation, food in the form of breakfast and lunch for all students at our seven major communities,” Hyatt said. “We want them all to have the opportunity to participate.”

The memorandum of understanding with UNM-Gallup is complete and the district is working with NTU to complete their agreement. Three community meetings have been conducted and more than 700 people attended.

“It’s about time. I really like the fact that you’re working with NTU and that you’re providing food and transportation,” Commissioner Genevieve Jackson said.

ON THE RISE

Other areas of the county are looking equally impressive.

Sara Keeler, finance director for McKinley County, was pleased to report to the board that fiscal year 2017 final audit report for McKinley County was completed.

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"I wanted to thank my staff and every department in the county. It was a long road. I'm very proud of this audit. It was a long time coming," Keeler said before introducing Farley Vener of Hinkle & Landers.

Vener is president and a major partner for the Albuquerque-based CPA firm.

He said an audit of the county's financial statements were done in compliance with generally accepted accounting standards within the U.S.

Management has numerous responsibilities, he said, adding that maintaining the books and records for a county is labor intensive.

"In summary, we gave an unmodified clean opinion. There were no material weaknesses, no significant deficiencies, no non-compliance material to the financial statements," Vener said.

Commissioner Carol Bowman-Muskett motioned to accept the report and Lee seconded. The commission accepted the report by a vote of 3-0.

Mayor Jackie McKinney spoke in support of adopting Ordinance No. Jan-18-001. The ordinance was for placing restrictions on the hours during which a dispenser or retailer may sell alcoholic beverages in unbroken packages for consumption.

"The city adopted the same ordinance in August. We [believe] that it is important for the safety of our citizens of this area," McKinney said.

Bowman-Muskett motioned to accept and Jackson seconded. The vote passed, 2-1. Lee voted in opposition. The ordinance becomes effective 30 days after it is recorded.

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