

Researchers say Kennecott tailings pile is no longer a threat

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Deseret News

Published: Saturday, Jan. 9, 2010 9:21 p.m. MST

MAGNA — Controversy over safety at Kennecott's mine tailings impoundment north of Magna was put to rest Friday, at least for members of the independent investigative committee.

"Closure" was the word of the day as committee members voted 9-0 to approve the final report by Tetra Tech Inc., an independent engineering research company tasked to evaluate safety at the 5,700-acre pile of mine waste.

The findings were initially made public in October with no substantial changes made before the report's final passage.

Researchers concluded that safety measures since 1988 have ensured that no residences would be threatened in the event of a major earthquake.

Committee co-chairman and Salt Lake County Councilman Michael Jensen said the committee was relieved by the findings and hopes residents will find closure.

"There was a lot of nervousness in the community," he said. "I think this helps us have confidence knowing our homes are safe."

Magna residents expressed outrage in 2008 after 20-year-old documents came to light indicating Kennecott was aware of earthquake-related risks at the massive pile but did not make the information public.

Concerns that a tidal wave of mine sludge could bury parts of the town in the event of a major earthquake led to the formation of the 17-member Salt Lake County Kennecott Tailings Impoundment Committee. (Only nine attended Friday's meeting.)

Impact from any potential breach on the south side would likely be limited to a run out of debris "across Highway 201 and slightly onto the adjacent golf course south of the highway," the committee concluded.

Kennecott spokeswoman Jana Kettering said the findings validated the company's methodologies, and she hopes the community can move beyond the controversy.

"Kennecott is committed to working and communicating with the community about the issues," she said. "We are looking forward rather than back. We hope this provides closure."

Jensen said the investigation and report should help resolve community concerns.

"We're obviously disappointed with what happened years ago, but Kennecott is a vital part of the community, and I think we've moved beyond this," he said.

Committee member Kelly Harman lives in the shadow of the tailings impoundment and said the report resolves his concerns.

"I was never really worried, but these findings validate what Kennecott was already doing," he said.

Harman said changes at the company as well as increased outside regulation would likely prevent any future breach of trust. Even so, Harman said the report should not be seen as a green light for development closer to the impoundment.

"It's important to maintain a buffer zone around the pile," he said. "I hope we're smart enough stewards in the future."

The committee also approved a plan to disseminate an informational letter explaining the findings to property owners and residents north of 2700 South and west of 8000 West, the areas closest to the impoundment.

The full report is available at www.magnatailingsstudy.slco.org.

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