

How deep is deep enough?

Questa community challenges current mine cleanup study

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Cody Hooks/The Taos News

Arno Cordova, right, speaks during a community meeting in Questa on Thursday (April 11), where state and federal officials discussed the cleanup of the Questa Chevron mine and related tailing facilities.

It had been about a year since representatives for the Environmental Protection Agency stood in front of the Questa community to talk about the cleanup of the molybdenum mine. So when the chance to meet face-to-face at the VFW hall came around Thursday (April 11), about 50 people from the community showed up to hear from the experts but also to question the rollout of a years-long study of the tailings dams west of the village.

The Questa Chevron mine operated from the 1920s until 2014, when it was permanently closed. But even before the mine shuttered and 300 people were laid off, the federal government was working to clean up the site through the EPA Superfund program.

One key area of the cleanup is the tailings facility – dams of crushed, rocky material that was left over from intermittent mining of molybdenum. The Chevron solar power facility that can be seen from the highway stands atop the south end of the tailings facility.

Starting this month, Chevron will be piloting a way of “capping” the tailings facility, a means of preventing further contamination to groundwater.

In 2010, a “record of decision” (or ROD, a part of the Superfund process) said that the entire 1,100 acres of tailings should be capped with three feet of cover material to create an “evapotranspiration cover.”

Such covers are becoming increasingly common as a way of capping waste material from mines and landfills, according to the EPA. The system essentially creates a self-contained ecosystem so that water doesn’t penetrate into the tailings, but is taken up and breathed out – “transpired” – by the plants that grow on top of the waste.

Such covers range from 2 to 10 feet thick, again according to the EPA.

However, the ROD also had a footnote that allowed for a study to see whether, instead of using three feet of cover, perhaps one or two feet would be sufficient to protect the environment and the health of nearby residents, said Elizabeth Pletan, an attorney for the regional EPA office.

An initial study was started near the solar facility in the early 2010s, said Gary Baumgarten, EPA’s project manager for the Questa mine. But questions quickly surfaced about whether the study was set up correctly and if it would indeed deliver the data needed to make a good decision, he said.

“It wasn’t going to give us a clear answer,” said Joseph Fox, project manager with the New Mexico Environment Department.

So around 2014, the agencies involved — including the regional EPA office and the state environment department — started talking about doing a different study, one that wouldn’t test all three depths, but would determine if two feet would be enough to cap the site effectively.

“We know from experience that two feet can be successful,” said Fox. “We feel pretty confident it will work.”

The plan for the two-foot study was approved around 2016. Construction starts sometime this month, though it will take until December to lay all the material over the 300-acre test plot, said Baumgarten. It will take five growing seasons to see if the two-foot cover is effective.

“If it doesn’t work, [Chevron] will have to go with the three feet and be done with it,” said Fox.

But some people in the community who are already deeply distrustful of Chevron and the federal government’s ability to clean up the site question several things: the science behind the evapotranspiration cover, the need for this current study and whether or not the results will actually benefit them and their neighbors.

“Capping is not going to do it because the damage is already done,” said Idabel Medina. “I really think [the tailings] should be removed, not capped.”

Environment officials defended the idea for the cover.

“We’ve seen thousands of acres of tailing impoundments [remediated] with this type of protective cover,” said Fox.

Baumgarten added that he couldn’t “think of one [mine remediation] where you dig up a million yards of tailing and move them somewhere else.”

“Questa has got a big problem,” said Questa resident Joe Cisneros. “I don’t think we’re ever going to see this place cleaned up ... it’s too far gone now.”

The Taos News will continue covering the cleanup of the Questa mine. If you have specific questions or concerns about the cleanup, email chooks@taosnews or call the reporter, Cody Hooks, at (575) 758-2241.