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Donna Kemp Spangler, Editor

2009 Water Week—A Splash, Organizers Say

The arrival of spring in May coincided with the third annual Water Week, co-sponsored by the Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ), an apt reminder that it's too soon to water your lawn.

May 1 kicked off a variety of events statewide, highlighting the importance of water conservation. Since Governor Huntsman declared the first full week in May Water Week in 2007, participation has sprouted, organizers said.

"It's been pretty enthusiastic," said Alane Boyd, director of the Intermountain Section of American Water Works Association (AWWA). "It's getting bigger and better every year. It's amazing to see people learn so much about our water resources."

The goal of Water Week, according to its website www.waterweek.org, is to "promote the importance of water and water conservation. Conservation is very important and each year gets more critical as water runs low. According to the United National Development Program, more than 1 billion people – about one in six people in this world – have no access to clean and safe drinking water while over 2 billion lack accesses to adequate sanitation. The effects of unclean water often lead to an endless cycle of poverty, conflict, disease and death."

In Utah, the second driest state in the nation, conservation is paramount to stave off times of drought. That's a key message touted at the various fairs and celebrations throughout Water Week.

DEQ assisted organizers in supplying libraries throughout the states with important information on water conservation. Division of Water Quality also staffed a booth at the Salt Lake Library during the film, "Poison Water."

And, many people came out to the Garden Fair at Sejo Lily Gardens – despite the rain, said Boyd.

Other popular events included water walks at parks in St. George and Sandy. People also flooded to the many tours of water treatment plants, landscaping classes, art shows and films.

“We are excited to help facilitate discussions about water, which is vital to all of us,” said Bill Sinclair, acting executive director of DEQ.

Clean Air Competition Kicks Off in June

By Stacey Adams

Engineer Chad Harris rides his bike to his office at the Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) – a 13 mile round trip, four days a week, all year long – saving 208 vehicle miles a month.

He’s not alone. Other DEQ employees help improve the air quality by taking mass transit or carpooling each day. Therron, Greg, Mark and Jim drive together for their daily 50 mile commute. By carpooling, they’ve essentially eliminated three vehicles from northbound I-15 traffic and reduced 1,000 individual miles a week.

These efforts and others will be at the heart of “The Clear the Air Challenge,” a six week long competition that Gov. Jon Huntsman, Mayors Ralph Becker and Peter Corroon will kick off on June 1. Participants will have six weeks to bike, walk, carpool, telecommute or take mass transit to work between June 1 and July 10 in efforts to encourage individuals and teams to reduce their vehicle miles traveled. The goal of this challenge is to eliminate 300,000 vehicle trips, save one million miles, and reduce vehicle emissions by 1.8 million pounds during the hot days of summer when ozone pollution is at its worst.

“We’re trying to get people to think more about their long-term driving habits,” Michele Straube with Salt Lake Mayor Ralph Becker’s Salt Lake Solutions told The Deseret News.

Here’s how it works. Participants will have individual login accounts to keep track of their trips saved, which will qualify them or their team for weekly prize drawings. Prizes range from certificates to restaurants and shops, passes to local attractions, T-shirts, backpacks, and other goodies. The grand prizes include a new bike and use of a Compressed Natural Gas (CNG) vehicle for a week.

In addition to earning points for saving trips, participants are awarded points by attending the educational workshops being offered.

Bryce Bird, assistant director of the Division of Air Quality, will be presenting an air quality workshop on June 18 at DEQ. Bird will explain the progress and challenges to keeping Utah’s air clean and how the public can improve air quality. Other workshops will feature travel strategies offered by the Utah Department of Transportation (UDOT) and bike safety training tips and information provided by the Bike Collective.

DEQ’s Division of Air Quality and Office of Planning and Public Affairs, along with a 20 member partner team including UDOT, Salt Lake County, Salt Lake City’s Office of Sustainability, Salt Lake Chamber of Commerce, and the Utah Clean Cities Coalition, organized what could become an annual event. The project was coordinated through Salt Lake Solutions.

For more information about the Clear the Air Challenge, including the educational workshop schedule, list of partners, prizes, and travel strategies check out the following: www.cleartheairchallenge.org, www.twitter.com/cleartheairutah or search for the challenge pages www.facebook.com and www.linkedin.com.

Stacee Adams is an environmental planning consultant with DEQ's Office of Planning and Public Affairs.

DEQ's Dogged Determination Put Wheels in Motion

Ceremony Marks Start of Tailings Removal

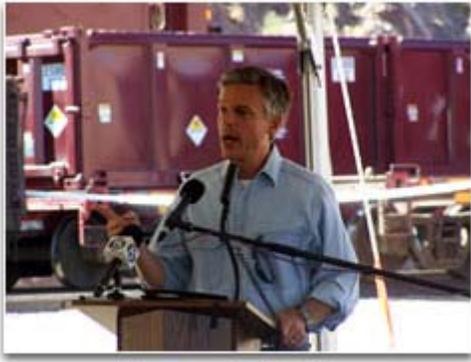
Moab, Utah – A trainload of uranium waste from the defunct Cold War-era Atlas mill left here May 4 at the cheers of dignitaries and locals, signaling the removal of the mountain-sized radioactive tailings away from the banks of the Colorado River to a more suitable site at Crescent Junction 30 miles away.



Connie Nakahara and Loren Morton (DRC)

But the work began decades ago when Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) officials and many others dug in their heels and refused to accept the federal government's plan to simply leave the 18-million-ton pile right where it is.

"Water quality issues were at the forefront for convincing the federal government to move the tailings pile," recalls Loren Morton, a section manager for the Utah Division of Radiation Control (DRC) who was instrumental in developing the state's technical position to remove the uranium tailings threatening the Colorado River, a source of drinking water for 25 million people downstream.



Governor Jon Huntsman.

At a ribbon-cutting ceremony, Governor Jon Huntsman praised Grand County and others for going “nuclear” on the issue to make sure the tailings pile removal became a priority. “It was a matter of pride,” he said. “The very fact 430 acres of waste is being moved is a big deal. It’s a tribute to the people who populate this area.”

The first shipment actually occurred April 20, but the official ceremony marking the event came two weeks later. The tailings shipments begin at the rate of one shipment of 88 rail cars a day, four days a week. The \$1 billion project received an infusion of \$108 million of federal stimulus money to help speed up the shipments to seven times a week beginning this summer. Completion is anticipated by 2028.

It took a lot of effort on the part of many people to make it happen, recalls Morton and others at the ceremony, including Dianne Nielson, energy advisor for Huntsman and former executive director of DEQ, and Connie Nakahara, who has been the state’s liaison since 2007.

Atlas Minerals Corp. (Atlas) shut down its uranium processing mill in 1984. The Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) had federal oversight at the time and in 1993 determined that leaving the uranium tailings in place didn’t pose an impact to the environment.

Bill Sinclair, acting executive director of DEQ and then director of DRC, took exception to that finding.

“The NRC was trying to short-cut the process,” recalls Sinclair. “We felt a full-blown environmental impact statement was needed at minimum.”



In 1995, Morton traveled to NRC headquarters in Washington, D.C., and when looking over the files he discovered NRC hadn’t mandated groundwater protection requirements for Atlas until 1987 – three decades after the uranium mill first operated in the early 1950s.

“The nest was already fowled and pollution was bleeding into the river,” said Morton. Toxic chemicals such as ammonia were leaching into the river and threatening not only local river water quality but also several species of endangered fish.

“The NRC had to back up and start all over again and involve stakeholders,” Morton said.

In 1998, Atlas filed bankruptcy and in 2001 the Department of Energy (DOE) took over the site. DOE, however, favored a cheaper plan of cleaning the contamination in the river and stabilizing the pile by capping it in place.

That wasn’t acceptable to neither DEQ nor Grand County.

Nielson approached Morton to take another look at the hydrology of the river. Morton worked with federal scientists to do more sampling. The compelling point came when the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), using sophisticated hydraulic modeling, determined there’s a significant chance the river could shift, scour the riverbank, and undercut the tailings pile causing widespread contamination downstream.

That argument helped convince DOE that capping the tailings probably would not be enough to protect the pile from the next large-scale flood.

It took political muscle from Utah’s congressional delegation to make it a funding priority.

“We spent the early years struggling with the pollution problem,” Morton said. “The NRC and DOE said the pollution could be controlled, it can be intercepted.”

“But preventing pollution is the bigger issue,” he added. “With the tailings not there anymore the risk of environmental harm has been removed and it won’t be a legacy for our grandchildren to pay for later.”

DEQ Employees Take Kids to Work and Learn From Them

All in a morning’s work, the 100 or so school-aged children here at the Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) got the scoop on “The Dog Poop Initiative” and Dan Pope’s weather forecast at the annual “Take Your Child to Work Day” on May 11.



Valarie Warr and daughter, Tiffany, 6

Bill Sinclair, acting executive director of DEQ, welcomed the 60-some employees who toted their kids to DEQ, by leading them in a lesson on pollution prevention. He recited “The Dog Poop Initiative,” by telling them a story about what happens when people see dog poop – they warn others about it but do nothing.

“We can’t wait for others to clean it up,” he told the audience. “It’s everybody’s responsibility. So remember this, ‘We need to strive to become scoopers and leaders, instead of poopers and pointers.’ It doesn’t matter who puts it there, we need to go forward and clean it up.”

KSL Meteorologist Dan Pope carried that message a step further.

“Let’s talk about air pollution,” he said. “About 60 to 80 percent of the air pollution comes from cars. If we take mass transit that means we’re not using as many cars,”

The children in the audience couldn’t agree more.

Carpooling helps prevent air pollution, said one student. Carpooling means you have someone pick you up and drive you to work.



Brent Everett and daughters, Bronwyn, 4 (left), and Kendall, 6.

Not surprising the kids knew the air quality conditions based on DEQ’s “green, yellow and red” conditions.

Green means good air quality, yellow means it is getting worse and red means bad air quality or “poison air” as one kid put it.

Jacob Bird didn’t need any coaching from his father, Bryce Bird, assistant director of Air Quality when he knew the day’s weather forecast to the degree – “high 81,” he responded.

Pope was impressed. “Why am I crazy about the weather?” he asked Jacob.

“You are concerned about the earth,” Jacob responded.

Pope couldn’t argue there. He said he knew he wanted to be a weatherman in the 6th grade ever since at the age of 4 he would watch with wonder thunderstorms.

“Take Your Child to Work Day” is a tradition here at DEQ, said organizers Lori Walker and Jodie Swanson, both with the Office of Planning and Public Affairs. Each year activities are planned intended to be educational as well as fun.

This year's event featured a slideshow on the 100 or so employees who pledged to reduce their carbon footprint by either changing their behavior or installing more efficient appliances.



Bend-in-the-river activity

The day also included a tour of "Bend-in-the-River" about building a sustainable, natural ecosystem within an urban environment so that kids and adults alike can understand and learn what a healthy ecology has to offer a community.

"The theme of this year's 'Take Your Child to Work Day' centered on pollution prevention," Walker said. "I thought having a weatherman here would be entertaining as well as an educational way to talk about pollution."

Although the school kids learned a lot, their parents did as well.

"I really enjoyed Dan Pope's presentation," said Bryce Bird. "It was interesting and captured our message of ways to reduce pollution very well."

DEQ Scientist Honored for Work in Underground Tanks

Robin V. Davis, scientist for the Division of Environmental Response and Remediation (DERR) recently received the prestigious Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) Lifetime Achievement Award for work in underground storage tank sites.



Robin Davis, DERR

Davis has worked as a scientist for DERR since 1990 analyzing the risks associated with Leaking Underground Storage Tank (LUST) sites, evaluating soil vapor data and developing screening criteria for vapors associated with dissolved petroleum hydrocarbons.

“This award was presented to Robin from her friends and colleagues with thanks for her years of dedication and significant contributions to the science of site assessment, risk evaluation and vapor intrusion for LUST sites,” said Matt Small, hydrogeologist with EPA Region 9.

Davis, who lives in Salt Lake City, was thrilled to be among the recipients who have received the award.

“This is such an honor to be recognized nationally for a job I enjoy,” said Davis.

Previous award recipients include John Wilson of U.S. EPA Kerr Laboratory and Bruce Bauman of American Petroleum Institute.

Drop Off Drug Disposal at Smith’s Drew Over a Hundred

Over 100 people dropped off their unused prescriptions and over-the-counter drugs at the state’s first-ever collection event at the 4500 South Smith’s Food and Drug Store on April 25. That resulted in 214 pounds of medications collected for proper disposal.

“I was very pleased with the success,” said Marsha Gilford, Smith’s Vice President of Public Affairs. “Customers appreciated the opportunity to safely discard their old medications.”

This Take-Back Collection Event is a pilot project in partnership with the Salt Lake County Sheriff’s Office, Millcreek Precinct, the Utah Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ), the Utah Poison Control Center and the Salt Lake Valley Health Department.

Leah Ann Lamb, assistant director of the Division of Water Quality (DWQ), helped organize the event intended to raise awareness about environmental and social impacts of having old medicines in the home or trash. Flushing medicines down the toilet or sink enter the water because some wastewater treatment plants aren’t designed to remove them. There’s also a growing problem of teens who gain access to drugs through their parents or friends’ medicine cabinets.

“It’s not only important to properly dispose of prescription drugs because it can harm the environment but also it removes the potential threat of someone getting in a medicine cabinet and abusing the drugs or accidents of poisonings,” Lamb said.

And many people came from all over – so glad for the opportunity of cleaning out their medicine cabinets and disposing of the drugs properly.

“We had folks come to this event from 20 different zip codes,” Lamb said. “One-hundred percent of them said they would do this again.”

DEQ provides grants to local law enforcement agencies for collection boxes. Smith’s was the first retail location to sponsor an in-store medication collection event in Utah. For more information on

proper medication disposal including a list of the collection box locations, visit:
www.medicationsdisposal.utah.gov.