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For Immediate Release

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Secretary Curry Issues Order Granting Discharge Permit for Homestake Mining Co.

(Santa Fe, NM) – New Mexico Environment Department Secretary Ron Curry issued a final order granting the renewal and modification of a discharge permit for the closed Grants Mill Reclamation Project Site for the former Homestake Mine in Grants, N.M.

The company needs the permit to clean up groundwater contamination created from past uranium mining. The order allows Homestake, located five miles north of Milan in Cibola County, to discharge up to 1,166,000 gallons a day of contaminated water to two existing collection ponds, two existing evaporative ponds and one proposed evaporative pond.

“The Secretary agrees with nearby residents that the restoration of groundwater is critical and that ground water resources must be restored for use, including reasonably foreseeable future use,” according to the Secretary’s Final Order on the permit. “Based on past remediation efforts at the site, the residents have reason to be frustrated with progress to date and suspicious of promises as to feasible remediation timelines.”

The permit will also allow the company to construct a third evaporative pond that is needed to provide more capacity for remediation efforts at the site. “The construction and operation of the proposed EP-3 (Evaporative Pond) evaporative pond has undergone tremendous study and review,” according to the hearing officer’s report on the permit modification and renewal. “The NRC conducted an Environmental Assessment on the impacts of the (pond) prior to amending Homestake’s NRC License to require the addition of EP-3 to Homestake’s groundwater remediation program.” The report concludes groundwater in the area, which is at a depth of 25 to 50 feet with a total dissolved solids concentration of 2,734 milligrams per liter, will not be harmed by the new pond or the remediation project.

Most of the concerns raised by people who made comments during the hearing were related to past uranium mining practices in the area and groundwater and health concerns related to those operations.

“It may be that the Remedial System Evaluation conducted by the Army Corps of Engineers for the Environmental Protection Agency will, when finalized, prompt modifications to the larger strategy for remediation of the Mill Site,” according to the final order. “The (Ground Water) bureau is directed to look at this issue closely as it proceeds with its review of the renewal application for DP-200, expected to go to hearing later in 2010.”

The Environment Department's Hearing Officer, Felicia Orth, presided over a hearing on the matter January 12 in Grants.

The Environment Department has been investigating groundwater quality within the San Mateo Creek basin near of the Homestake Mill site. NMED conducted the investigation to better understand, and potentially address, possible ground water contamination from past uranium mining and milling activities. The U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission required remediation of groundwater contamination at the Homestake Mining Company uranium mill site since the 1970s. Recent groundwater quality data from samples collected in and near abandoned uranium mine shafts in the Ambrosia Lake area also indicate the occurrence of groundwater contaminants in concentrations exceeding maximum contaminant levels and state drinking water standards within this area of the basin.

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