

The Salt Lake Tribune

Kennecott tailings pose no threat to homes, report says

Magna » But study found that in a 7.25 quake the tailings would travel farther than suspected.

By Jeremiah Stettler

Updated: 1/15/2010 10:26:05 PM MST

Magna » If the Salt Lake Valley is shaken by a major earthquake, Kennecott's mine-tailings impoundment on the north side of this unincorporated burb won't threaten any homes.

The soupy sediment may wash across State Road 201 and perhaps onto the outer edge of a nearby golf course, but it won't travel any farther.

So says an investigative report released this month by the Salt Lake County Kennecott Tailings Impoundment Committee, formed nearly two years ago to determine whether Kennecott's tailings pile posed a threat to residential Magna.

A Salt Lake Tribune investigation found that Kennecott, starting in the late 1980s, concealed the possibility that its mine-waste impoundment could fail during a massive quake and inundate nearby Green Meadows Estates.

But that impoundment, the study has concluded, no longer endangers the neighborhood.

"The study shows that no residential structures, including those close to the embankment, are in danger of run-out," wrote Salt Lake County Councilman Michael Jensen, a co-chairman of that investigative committee. "This is at the heart of most of the concerns from the community."

Jensen, who lives in Magna, described his panel as "relieved" by the findings.

Kennecott is happy to have the science on its side -- based on the research of the committee's independent engineer, Tetra Tech.

"Tetra Tech has confirmed what we knew all along: that our study methodologies were appropriate," spokeswoman Jana Kettering said. "We're glad that Kennecott and Magna and Salt Lake County can now move past this issue and have closure."

The investigation did find that the mine's tailings, in a 7.25 quake, likely would travel farther than Kennecott had suspected.

The copper giant had estimated that the slurry would run no farther than 190 feet and stop in the westbound lanes of State Road 201. Tetra Tech determined that the tailings could spill twice that far, traveling 428 feet. The sediment would cross the highway, but reach no homes.

That said, Kennecott's impoundment is expected to withstand a less-substantial quake. In a temblor of 6.5 or less, the study found, the dikes would hold.

jstettler@sltrib.com

The tailings tale

Engineers warned then-Kennecott President Frank Joklik in 1988 that part of a huge mine-tailings pond could fail in a major quake.

Documents show Joklik ordered a cover-up to avert "panic," and state regulators agreed to keep reports under wraps.

In 1989, Kennecott launched a \$550 million project to stabilize the old pond and build a new one.

In spring 2008, current Kennecott President Andrew Harding declared the site safe, but offered to pay \$250,000 toward an independent investigation.

That probe, by Tetra Tech, yielded the newly released findings that show the tailings impoundment poses no threat to nearby homes, but could damage State Road 201 in a major quake.

Want to read the report?

The investigative report on the safety of Kennecott's tailings impoundment is available at www.magnatailingsstudy.slco.org.