

Rum Jungle uranium mine in NT polluting environment 45 years after closure

By Sara Everingham
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Traditional owner Kathy Mills finds every visit to site of the old Rum Jungle uranium mine upsetting.

The site, 100 kilometres south of Darwin, is overrun with scrubby weeds, there are two abandoned mining pits, large mounds of waste rock and the water in a diverted channel of the Finnis River is tinged orange and brown from contamination.

But the great-grandmother wants to show people around in the hope it will help her family's long battle to have the site rehabilitated.

"It has just been lingering on and on and on and many of my people have passed on and I am almost the last man standing in that people who fought for recognition of this land," she said.

Ms Mills wants the Commonwealth to "hurry up" and rehabilitate the Rum Jungle mine - a Commonwealth-backed venture that produced uranium for the nuclear weapons programs of the US and British governments.

The mine closed 45 years ago but acid and metals are draining into the environment and the site remains off limits to the public including traditional owners.

This month's federal budget had \$11 million for the NT Government to put the finishing touches on a plan for rehabilitation. Ms Mills said she was running out of time to see Rum Jungle fixed.

Mine took away 'aspect of land's importance'

When Rum Jungle was developed traditional owners had no say in it.

One mining pit was dug into a sacred women's site on the east branch of the Finnis River and the flow of the river was diverted for one kilometre.

Ms Mills vividly remembers the anger of one of her older relatives when he saw for the first time how the mine had transformed the land.

"It took away the whole aspect of the importance of that land," she said.

But in the early 1950s the Commonwealth saw uranium as an opportunity to develop the north. At the time, Rum Jungle was a major industrial development in northern Australia.

The then prime minister Robert Menzies came to the Top End to open it.

Notorious for environmental problems

When mining finished at Rum Jungle in 1971, no rehabilitation was done and the site became notorious for its environmental problems. In the early 1980s, the Rum Jungle site could not be handed over to traditional owners as part of the successful Finnis River Land claim in case they became liable for the environmental problems.

The Commonwealth spent \$18 million on rehabilitation in the 1980s but some of the work did not last. At Rum Jungle, scientists from the NT Government are monitoring contamination in the Finnis River.

The NT Government's principal mining scientist, Tania Laurencont, stands on a bridge looking over the small, shallow pools of the East branch of the Finnis River, where copper contamination's left the water clear but with barely any aquatic life. She said the biggest problem at Rum Jungle was not radiological waste, but acid and metals leaching from waste rock into the environment.

"You see elevated concentrations of metals and sulphate going down the river and causing impacts downstream," she said.

Millions spent on mine rehabilitation

Since 2009 the Federal Government has spent \$18 million on a new rehabilitation plan for Rum Jungle.

The Mines Department estimates it will take another eight years to rollout that clean-up plan at a cost of more than \$200 million. The Federal Government said any future funding for Rum Jungle would be worked out once the NT Government finishes its rehabilitation plan.

The head of the NT's Legacy Mines Unit, Mike Fawcett, said not doing the work would also come at a cost.

"We've seen a deterioration at the site," Mr Fawcett said.

"Potentially if we get cyclonic events that may be a catastrophic step of degradation and so the impacts in the river system will increase over time again."

Diverted river could be put back on natural course

The clean-up plan is being drawn up in consultation with traditional owners and could involve putting the diverted section of the Finnis River back on its natural course.

"Traditional owners were really excluded not just during the mining phase but also during the 1980s rehab," mining scientist Tania Laurencont said.

She is optimistic about what can be achieved saying a lot has been learned since the 1980s about mine rehabilitation.

Ms Mills said she hoped the land would be cleaned up and handed back to Aboriginal people within her lifetime.

"I am feeling hopeful and I am hoping that I am feeling right because time is running out for me as well and it's been a long haul trying to get some action to rehabilitate," she said.