

PRESS RELEASE

Zurich, 7 April 2014

International Green Cross programme Water-Life-Peace in Tajikistan:

Chkalovsk pilot project leads the way for uranium mine clean-ups

For more than 60 years, uranium was mined in several places in Tajikistan and the extracted ores were processed and concentrated. These activities have left a legacy of contaminated sites that have a negative effect on health and the environment. As part of a UNDP project to prioritise uranium-contaminated sites in Central Asia, Green Cross Switzerland decided to cooperate with the Zewo-certified Swiss Foundation for Mine Action (FSD), Geneva, to clean up one of Tajikistan's most critical mine dumps in Chkalovsk. The government of Tajikistan attaches great importance to the clean-up project at the former uranium processing plant in Chkalovsk, which is seen as leading the way for future clearances of sites contaminated by uranium mines.

Mined uranium was processed in Chkalovsk for decades. After processing, the remaining waste was dumped on the factory site on the outskirts of the town. This put the 25,000 inhabitants of Chkalovsk and the environment at serious risk from wind-borne uranium dust, gases and material dissolved in surface and ground water. The mine dump was therefore sealed with a cover back in the Soviet era. Over the years, however, this cover and the surrounding safety fence became so porous that animals grazed on the waste heap and the surrounding orchards were once again threatened by uranium dust carried by the wind. The first step thus involved enclosing the entire waste heap inside a three metre-high wall of concrete slabs so that people and animals could no longer be exposed to large amounts of radiation by entering the waste dump unnecessarily.

This must be followed by repairs to defective or damaged areas in the cover. Besides defects in the cover, an old drainage pipeline showing high radiation levels was discovered at the dump. This must be carefully decontaminated and sealed against penetrating radionuclides to prevent radioactive rainwater from polluting the adjacent orchards and the farmers' cultivated land. Alongside the heap, loading areas where the ores and concentrates were dumped must also be cleaned up.

Population protection and public health measures

Another area of focus is on identifying the radioactive contamination risks and their health hazards to the population. This involves a systematic examination of homes, workplaces and sources of food and water in the area surrounding the Chkalovsk waste dump. If radiation levels above the safe limits are detected, protective technologies such as radon detectors and water filters must be installed. Where contamination is most severe, the affected families have to be relocated to less contaminated places.

In addition, information events are planned in cooperation with local authorities and schools to raise awareness of the techniques and measures of radiation hygiene. By washing hands, wiping away dust and finely chopping and washing meat and vegetables, radioactive pollutants can be thoroughly rinsed out and removed. Where local communities are alerted to this threat and provided with simple, affordable safety measures, the population can reduce radiation exposure without sacrificing their culture and way of life.

Green Cross Switzerland facilitates overcoming consequential damage caused by industrial and military disasters and supports access to clean water through the Water-Life-Peace programme. It focuses on improving the quality of life for people affected by chemical, radioactive and other types of contamination, as well as promoting sustainable development in the spirit of co-operation instead of confrontation. The objectives of the ZEWO-certified environmental organisation are supported by the non-party Green Cross Parliamentary Group, which comprises 26 members of the Council of States and 66 members of the National Council. Based in Geneva, Green Cross International was founded in 1993 by Mikhail Gorbachev, former President of the Soviet Union.

For further information, please contact Dr. Stephan Robinson, Unit Manager (Water, Legacy), Green Cross Switzerland, tel. 061 382 91 97 or mobile 079 625 64 67.

Caption – Photo:

Newly setup fencing around the mine dump to protect against uranium dust in Chkalovsk .