

Spread of radioactivity

Beginning in 1944 and for decades thereafter, uranium ore was extracted from Navajo land in the southwestern United States for the nation's nuclear weapons program. Waste from the mines and processing mills entered the air, soil, water and homes.

Sources of contamination

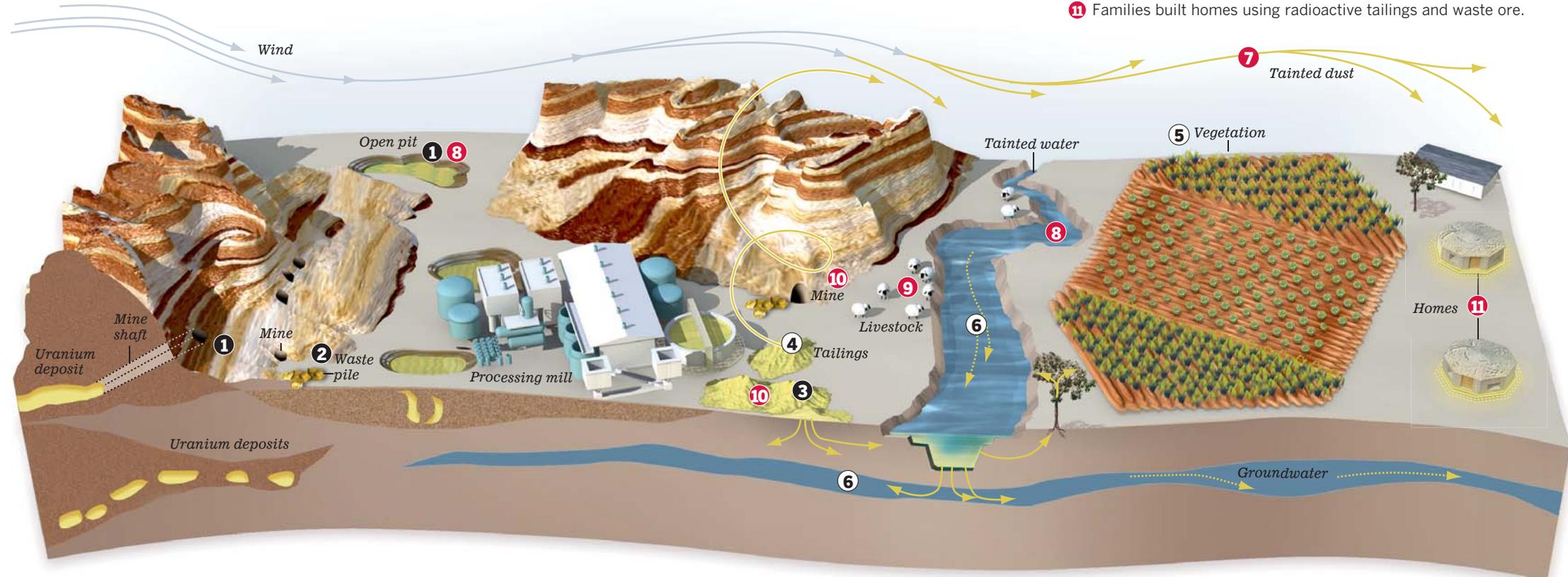
- 1 Open tunnels and pits from abandoned mines often were not fenced off or otherwise restricted.
- 2 Waste ore was left piled at mine sites.
- 3 Huge piles of fine-grain sand, known as tailings, left over from uranium processing were exposed to the weather.

How contamination spread

- 4 Tailings were spread by winds across a wide area; radioactive dust settled in the soil.
- 5 Contaminated crops and other vegetation were consumed by wildlife and livestock.
- 6 Radioactive runoff percolated down to groundwater sources.

How humans were exposed

- 7 Navajos inhaled radioactive dust.
- 8 They drank contaminated water from abandoned pit mines that filled with rain or from drinking water supplies that had become tainted.
- 9 They butchered contaminated animals and ate the meat.
- 10 Children dug caves in piles of mill tailings and played in the mines.
- 11 Families built homes using radioactive tailings and waste ore.



(Drawing is schematic)

Sources: Environmental Protection Agency, Southwest Research and Information Center, Times reporting. Graphics reporting by TOM REINKEN

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