From: Andrew Bain
To: Clancy Tenley; Pamela Overman; Sheryl Bilbrey; Leah Butler; Harrison Karr; Jeanne Geselbracht
Subject: Fw: Supes Want Canyon Country Off-Limts to Uranium Mining
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Frederick Sherman <fred_sherman@yahoo.com>

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To Cheryl Arviso <cherylarviso@hotmail.com>, Andrew Bain/R9/USEPA/US@EPA, Bo Benallie <bo_benallie@yahoo.com>, Gerald Brown <crumpgb2004@yahoo.com>, Ken Chester <maiitso_2000@yahoo.com>, Vivan Craig <vivcraig@juno.com>, Carrie Dallas <carrie_dallas@comcast.net>, Danielson dbson <ddbson@yahoo.com>, Melinda Sue Deswood-Reust <melindadreust@navajo.org>, Wilson DeVore <devores_hogan@yahoo.com>, Gregory Dodge <dankwarrior@hotmail.com>, "Cara J. Dukepoo" <cara.dukepoo@yahoo.com>, Marlene Edgley <marlenepatrick@yahoo.com>, Wynoma Foster <w_foster@excite.com>, Roberta Freeland <rfreeland@navajotech.edu>, Andy Harvey <aah76@yahoo.com>, Terri Lameman <tlameman@frontiernet.net>, Lillie Lane <lane_lillie50@hotmail.com>, Mitze Lee <zitme2nau@yahoo.com>, glenna lee <glennahlee@yahoo.com>, Nelson & <roanhorse_06@yahoo.com>, Brenda Price <deanie_30@yahoo.com>, Priscilla Sanderson <psanderson@azcc.arizona.edu>, BK Seschillie <bseschillie@yahoo.com>, Mangas Slinkey <redsleeves2003@yahoo.com>, Eulynda Toledo <ebenalli@navajotech.edu>, Eulynda Toledo <etoledo@navajotech.edu>, Verna William <vrn_wllm@yahoo.com>

cc

Subject RE: Supes Want Canyon Country Off-Limts to Uranium Mining

Supes want Canyon Country off-limits to uranium mining

By CYNDY COLE
Sun Staff Reporter
Wednesday, February 06, 2008

County officials and the Grand Canyon Trust want Congress to block new claims and cancel existing ones

As uranium prospectors stake thousands more claims on the Arizona Strip and in the Kaibab National Forest each year, Coconino County's governing body is trying to block them.

The Coconino County Board of Supervisors unanimously voted Tuesday to ask Congress to put most of the federal lands surrounding the Grand Canyon out of uranium miners' reach.

Next, the Grand Canyon Trust plans to ask Arizona's delegation to draft a bill blocking new claims and canceling most of the existing ones around the canyon, including on parts of the Kaibab National Forest and the Arizona Strip.

It's called a withdrawal from mineral entry, and it has been used on other federal lands, including 159 square miles in the Valle Vidal of northern New Mexico.

"If there's anywhere in the country that it legitimately should happen, it's here," said Dave Gowdey, director of Grand Canyon Programs at the Trust. "I think part of it is, there's nobody in the past that's asked for it."

The price of uranium has more than quadrupled in recent years, sparking interest among international mining companies with claims north and south of the Grand Canyon.

VANE Minerals has proposed to drill a number of exploratory holes in the Tusayan Ranger District of the Kaibab National Forest.

Denison Mines has proposed reopening a mine southwest of Fredonia and is an owner of another mine near Red Butte that never opened but was heavily opposed by tribes.

Uranium miners have pledged that, this time, the mining would be below-ground, with modern safety precautions, and bonded to guarantee cleanup.

The ore would also not be milled locally, meaning the more refined and potent radioactive materials wouldn't be handled in northern Arizona, but would be sent to Utah.

Environmentalists are skeptical.

"We're still discovering problems from the uranium mining that happened in the '60s," Gowdey said. "They said they cleaned everything up. They said everything was hunky-dory."

These groups have two other options: Revising a mining law from 1872 that gives mining priority above most other uses on public land, or asking Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne to voluntarily put these Bureau of Land Management and Forest Service lands off limits to miners.

Asking an Arizona senator or representative to block future mining and limit mining to existing, proven claims, would be the most expedient, Gowdey said.

The Center for Biological Diversity is also supporting these measures.

Coconino County Supervisor Louise Yellowman described some of the events that ultimately led to a ban on uranium mining on the Navajo Nation.

Residents from around Tuba City approached her in 1980, complaining about miscarriages, cancer and strange illnesses. Some lived near a uranium mill five miles east of Tuba City, Rare Metals.

Navajos were told that the mining and processing was safe, and that any radiation couldn't penetrate the hard sandstone to impact drinking water -- as is happening now.

"And we believed it," Yellowman said.

Some of the areas mined were left unfilled, becoming ponds for swimming and drinking water.

Cattle died. Children developed odd sores on their feet, she said. Families living near the mill had children with disabilities.

The mill operated from 1956 to 1966, leaving tailings piles behind that were supposed to be kept under control by a chemical binder. The binding had failed by 1974, according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration, with gamma surveys finding radioactive waste had blown to other areas nearby.

Yellowman and others around Tuba City spent more than eight years asking for cleanup, writing letters and petitioning various governments.

She held press conferences and asked the county sheriff to come take a look.

The Department of Energy eventually recovered the waste and began pumping out contaminated groundwater.

But there may be other sites contaminated by tailings or leaching material from the mill.

Waste matching the chemical signature of some of what was processed at the Tuba City mill is now threatening to contaminate the only source of drinking water for a Hopi village downstream. Consultants have found uranium-related wastes in the local dump nearby.

Cyndy Cole can be reached at 913-8607 or at ccole@azdailysun.com.

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