



MINING:

DOE proposes restart of controversial lease program

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The Department of Energy is proceeding with the planned resumption of leasing federal land for uranium exploration and mining.

DOE's Office of Legacy Management released a draft environmental impact statement for the program last week that identifies continuing with leasing as the preferred option.

"It is assumed that there would be a total of 19 mines operating at various production rates at the same time during what would be considered the peak year of operations," the draft says.

DOE announced its intention to conduct new environmental reviews of the uranium leasing program amid lawsuits from environmental groups.

In October 2011 and March 2012 rulings, U.S. District Court Judge William Martinez for the District of Colorado scrapped a previous environmental assessment and finding of no significant impact for continuation and expansion of the leasing program (Greenwire, March 1, 2012).

DOE says it runs 31 tracts with a total of 25,000 acres in the western Colorado counties of Mesa, Montrose and San Miguel. Two tracts are not leased.

The department looked at five alternatives for moving forward, from scrapping the program to leaving it as is. The draft EIS says, "The potential impacts from the five alternatives for the various resource areas indicate that the potential impacts are generally negligible to moderate," with leaving things unchanged having the most impact.

The Center for Biological Diversity and the Sheep Mountain Alliance see the leasing program combined with a proposed mill in Montrose County as part of mining's unwelcome renaissance in the West.

Energy Fuels Inc., the company developing the mill, also has leases with DOE. It has significantly increased its presence in the U.S. uranium mining industry in recent years.

"Southwestern Colorado can't afford any more deadly uranium pollution, as new mining would promise," Taylor McKinnon, wildlands advocate with the Center for Biological Diversity, said in response to the draft EIS. "It's time for the DOE to finally say no to the uranium industry, to end mining and to instead focus on the massive cleanup job at hand."

Litigation pending in the 10th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals has been on hold pending completion of the environmental reviews.