

## 8. MINING:

### **Groups sue Interior over inaction on uranium claims near Grand Canyon** (09/29/2008)

**Eric Bontrager, E&ENews PM reporter**

Three environmental groups sued the Interior Department today for failing to act on a congressional resolution ordering it to withdraw 1 million acres of federal lands near the Grand Canyon from uranium exploration.

The House Natural Resources Committee voted, 20-2, in June to prohibit new uranium claims and exploration on Interior and Forest Service lands surrounding Grand Canyon National Park, but Interior has not acted.

The committee utilized authority under the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 to compel Interior to act. But the department rejected the committee's motion on a technicality, arguing that because Republicans walked out on the vote for the resolution, the committee did not have the majority of committee members it needed to reach a quorum.

Chairman Nick Rahall (D-W.Va.) said in a letter to Interior that because the resolution goes directly from the committee to the department, the committee requires no less than one-third of its members to reach a quorum, but the department has taken no action since.

"It's unacceptable to allow this administration to abuse their power by ignoring the resolution and putting the Grand Canyon, our nation's most beloved national park, at risk," said Roger Clark of the Grand Canyon Trust, which filed the lawsuit along with the Center for Biological Diversity and Sierra Club.

The three groups reached a settlement earlier this week with the Agriculture Department's Forest Service and a British mining company that halted plans for drilling at 39 sites near the southern boundary of Grand Canyon National Park. The groups said the Forest Service was improperly fast-tracking the project using a categorical exclusion to expedite the project's approval and inappropriately excluded the public from the decisionmaking process.

While the agency still maintains that it was not in the wrong to issue a categorical exclusion, the settlement requires the Forest Service to conduct an environmental impact statement for the exploratory drilling (*E&ENews PM*, Sept. 26).

The dispute over the project brought the issue of uranium mining near the Grand Canyon to the public eye, prompting the House committee's emergency resolution, which was met with heavy resistance from Republicans over its effect on nuclear energy development and the manner in which the resolution came before the committee.

Rahall and the Interior Department declined to comment on the lawsuit.

