



BLM Defies Congress, Authorizes Grand Canyon Uranium Exploration

by [mcjoan](#)

Thu May 07, 2009 at 09:26:03 AM PDT

This is **not a positive development from Salazar's Interior Department.**

The Bureau of Land Management has authorized several new uranium exploration permits near the Grand Canyon despite a congressional resolution last year barring new claims near the national park.

According to [documents](#) (pdf) released yesterday by the Center for Biological Diversity (CBD) and the Grand Canyon Trust, BLM on April 27 authorized Quaterra Alaska Inc. to conduct eight uranium mine exploration operations at five separate projects north of Grand Canyon National Park and west of the Kaibab Plateau.

"Our understanding is that exploration can begin immediately," said Taylor McKinnon, director of CBD's public lands program.

Quaterra Alaska is a subsidiary of Vancouver-based Quaterra Resources Inc.

All of the projects are within the 1 million acres of BLM and Forest Service land that the House Natural Resources Committee ordered to be withdrawn from new uranium mining claims in June 2008, according to the groups.

We need to go **back to last summer** to sort this out. Mining on public land surrounding Grand Canyon National Park is permitted under the 1872 mining law. Last June, in response to vast increases in claims-staking near the Grand Canyon, the House Natural Resources Committee passed a controversial, but valid, committee resolution which would have pulled 1 million acres of public lands from new mining claims for up to three years. Democrats on the committee used a rarely invoked provision in the Federal Land Policy and Management Act that allows the committee to withdraw public lands from various uses in emergency situations.

The Bush Interior Department, run by Dirk Kempthorne refused to comply with the House panel's resolution. Current Interior Secretary, Ken Salazar, has not yet agreed to comply.

However, the BLM's quiet authorization of these permits seems like a pretty clear clue of what he intends to do. While it's possible that regional BLM officials did this one on their own, it doesn't seem too likely.

A number of environmental organizations, and local and regional politicians, have been working to block further uranium exploration and mining in the area. One of those groups, the Center for Biological Diversity, **released this statement today:**

"The Bureau's continuing defiance of Congress on behalf of the uranium industry threatens one of our nation's most beloved national parks," said Taylor McKinnon, public lands program director for the Center for Biological Diversity. "It's time the Bureau of Land Management received the leadership it needs to put the Grand Canyon uranium rush to bed."

Spikes in the price of uranium during the past two years have caused thousands of new uranium claims, dozens of exploratory drilling projects, and movement to open several uranium mines on public lands immediately north and south of Grand Canyon. Concerns about damage to wildlife habitat as well as surface- and groundwater contamination of Grand Canyon National Park and the Colorado River have been expressed by previous Arizona Governor Janet Napolitano; the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California; the Southern Nevada Water Authority; the Arizona Game and Fish Department; the Navajo, Hopi, Havasupai, Hualapai, and Kaibab Paiute nations; and the Coconino County Board of Supervisors.

Note that the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California is on that list. Some 25 million people downriver from the Grand Canyon drink that water. A number of these groups banded together last year to sue Kempthorne for ignoring Congress. That suit is still pending, nonetheless, the plaintiffs did not receive notice of the BLM's new authorizations. As of now, the groups are evaluating how they'll respond to these new authorizations.

Meanwhile, Rep. Raul Grijalva introduced the Grand Canyon Watersheds Protection Act in March of 2008 and again in 2009, legislation that would permanently withdraw from mineral extraction the same 1 million acres encompassed by the Committee resolution. Congress needs to take quick action on that legislation, and pressure Salazar to rescind these authorizations.