

Havasupai Rally to Stop Uranium Mining at Grand Canyon, AZ

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Native tribes and environmental groups held a 4-day gathering, a reoccupation of sacred land, near the Grand Canyon, Arizona, calling for protections from proposed uranium mining. In late July, the Department of Interior ordered a 2 year ban on new mining and exploration. Tribal groups say the ban should include some 10 thousand existing mining proposals as well.

The Havasupai or People of the Blue Green Water live 3,000 feet below red and white earth at the base of the Havasuwa Cataract Canyon in Arizona. The village is accessible only by helicopter and packing horses. In 1882 the U.S. Government relocated the Havasupai from the Grand Canyon to this dry desert and its deep caverns; the Grand Canyon is now a prime tourist destination. Despite the relocation, the Supai people remain deep rooted to their place of origin, a place called Red Butte.

"This is lands where the thunder and rain cloud beings bring rain, and the drainages from this area go into the Cataract Canyon, which goes into Supai, where we live today," said Roland Manakaja, Tribal Natural Resource Director for the Havasupai tribe.

The red cracked dirt, pale green sage and vibrant juniper at Red Butte represent a place of great spiritual significance for the Havasupai, who regularly pilgrimage here for ceremonies. "It's a place where you can come to gather medicines. Some of our ancestors are buried here," said Manajaka, standing at the base of Red Butte.

Here, the Havasupai and neighboring tribes are holding a 4 day ceremony-a reoccupation of their land. "Mining entities threaten our wilderness our ancestral sacred lands. They're trespassing on that. We're here to relate that to them," said Fydell Jones, a Havasupai traditional dancer.

Uranium mining interests are staking claim to this sacred site. According to the Center for Biological Diversity, Denison mines is proposing to reopen 3 mines in the area. The Canyon mine is one of those mines, 2 miles from the base of Red Butte.

The Havasupai have successfully resisted the mine's operations for more than 2 decades and mining interests are still at it. The company promises to bring economic development and jobs to the area. "[The Canyon Mine] is going to generate jobs as any mine would, 35 to 40 jobs directly for 5 years. Then there's trucking ore and spin off benefits that would create roughly 60 to 80 jobs," said Ron Hochstein President and CEO of Denison Mines.

Environmental and tribal groups say the costs of uranium mining outweigh the benefits. "There's some places you should not mine and the Grand Canyon is one of them. It's an icon of the dominant culture, it's sacred to native people, and it's the source of drinking water for some 25 million people down stream," said Roger Clark the Air and Energy Director for the Grand Canyon Trust.

Clark and tribal groups say the process of uranium mining could contaminate the Colorado Basin and other sources of drinking water with uranium, mercury and cyanide. Hochstein disagrees. "There's no indication of that at all. The mining body is well above the aquifers; they're separated by sandstone and shales," he said.

Hochstein said Denison Mines plans to use underground mining to access the ore. Then it would be shipped to the White Mesa mill in Utah. As for Native Communities, they've seen the devastation from uranium mining.

"People that work in mines have [uranium] on their clothes, their vehicles, we can get cancer from this so we say we don't want uranium mining or any other activity like that around our homeland," said Jones.

In late July, the Obama Administration put a 2-year halt on new mining permits on 1 million acres of federal lands at the Grand Canyon, Arizona. In the meantime, the Department of Interior-DOI-will consider whether or not to ban new mining permits for the next 20 years.

"We have a responsibility to ensure we are developing our nation's resources in a way that protects local communities, treasured landscapes, and our watersheds," said Department of Interior Secretary Ken Salazar.

While people like Clark hail the move, they say it only solves half the problem of uranium mining. "In the best of all worlds it doesn't go far enough. We have a whole host of mines and valid claims that the withdrawal act doesn't effect. We still need to stop the ones that have a lot of momentum," he said.

The Obama Administration's vow to protect communities and water sheds leaves open a slew of mining projects in the works. According to the DOI, the ban does not apply to more than 10,600 valid existing mining claims in the area, including the Canyon Mine proposal at Red Butte. In fact, according to a press release from the DOI, "Several current uranium mining operations await State of Arizona environmental permits." Canyon mine is one of those operations.

Most of the existing mineral claims in the Grand Canyon are for mining uranium, According to the Grand Canyon Trust. "Most of the mineral deposits that have any value are uranium. Years ago they found copper in the same formations but it's not being pursued now. So, uranium is the main target for all those claims," said Clark.

While the Obama Administration is halting new mining claims, the administrations' support for nuclear power may be the impetus behind renewed uranium mining plans. During his presidential candidacy Barak Obama advocated for nuclear power. It's a promise the president has not backtracked from.

Energy Secretary Steven Chu spoke before congress in mid July, advocating for the presidents Energy Plan. "I think that nuclear power is going to be a very important factor to getting us to a low carbon future. The department of energy is doing with its tools everything it can to help restart the American nuclear industry with the loan guarantees we are pushing as hard as we can on that," said Chu.

Uranium is mined for use in military weapons and to make nuclear power. Thus a resurgence of nuclear power could create market demands for uranium. But advocating for nuclear power to combat global climate change isn't gaining support with native tribes in Arizona, whose communities have been ravaged from mining practices.

"The Navajo Nation, the Yakima, Laguna some of these other tribes have gone through the experience of mining companies invading their territories. A lot of the people are suffering from respiratory, leukemia, and cancer. So we don't want to see that happen here. We don't want to see the 8th wonder of the world become the 8th blunder of the world. We want it to be protected," said Manakaja.

To Native Americans it's no coincidence mining occurs on their land. The fact that Red Butte faces uranium mining-is directly connected to the continued genocide of the Havasupai people-where their life ways are threatened and denigrated.

"This area that we claim as sacred-once they start mining, it will prevent us from coming back here. From praying, singing, dancing for the earth-that ties us to the land. Our religion is based on these areas," said Matthew Putesoy SR, Vice Chair of the Havasupai tribe.

The fractured life ways results in fractured communities. The result is gangs, alcoholism and violence. "All over Indian country, we face gangs, violence, alcohol, drug abuse. The youth don't pay attention to our life ways, but we are teaching them where we are coming from," explained Putesoy S.R.

Still within their community, the Havasupai elders and leaders know their purpose is to protect life ways and the land. They call themselves Guardians of the Grand Canyon. Putesoy traveled before congress last week to discuss the need to reform mining laws and to protect their sacred site. Standing at the base of Red Butte, Putesoy summed up his speech before congress, "Would you allow mining to occur on your church or your synagogue? How would you like that? It's the same with this land; this is our Church. They are desecrating this area."

But uranium mining companies have the upper hand. According to government officials, they cannot ban a company's valid claim to mine public land. Frank Quimby, spokesperson for the DOI points to the 1872 Mining Law, "Not even congress can void existing valid rights to mining. It's just not permitted by the law."

Quimby explains the only way the government can stop a valid existing mine claim is by spending public dollars to buy back public land, "The only alternative that I'm aware of is that congress has the authority to legislate a buy out to appropriate money to the department and then the department would go in and negotiate with the valid existing right claim holders to buy out their interest," he said.

According to Clark, under the century old law, any company can file mineral claims on public land, foreign or otherwise. "Denison mines is a Canadian based company that has major contracts to send its mill and ore to Korea and to France. Here, there's some local jobs created. But most of the beneficiaries of putting the Grand Canyon at risk are other countries...If Iran came in and said they were going to mine in the Grand Canyon, it's legal under the 1872 mining laws," said Clark

How is it that a company can claim more rights to public land than the public and this nations first people? That's a discussion some environmental and tribal groups are asking and lawmakers are listening. There are two bills in congress aimed at amending the 1872 mining law.

Meanwhile, lawmakers are acting to protect the Grand Canyon from more mining claims. Congress member Raul Grijalva from Arizona has a bill in congress, HR 644-the Grand Canyon Watershed Protection Act of 2009. The bill would authorize the buyout of valid mining claims in the Grand Canyon. That's spending public money to buy back rights to public land. The bill has no price tag, as of the time of printing.

For environmental groups like the Grand Canyon Trust-tax payers foot the financial cost of nuclear power and uranium mining. "It's a subsidy all the way down. The fact they can take valuable minerals out of the land and not pay anyone for it—there's no royalties paid to anyone for this. The power plants in this country, if they're built, are built with huge federal subsidies. That's what the energy plan has in it for new nuclear power plants. Then all liability for accidents and waste is not the responsibility of the companies-it's also absorbed by the federal tax payer and the citizen," said Clark.

For the Havasupai, you cannot put a price tag on the earth at Red Butte. Pointing to a sage brush, Havasupai song keeper, Supai Waters said, "This plant is worth more than money."

The Grand Canyon Trust is requesting Denison Mines redo it's environmental impact statement-since the last one was completed in the 1980's. Clark says water quality and several new endangered species should be taken into account, like the California Condor.

As groups push for a slower public process, the Havasupai, Guardians of the Grand Canyon-People of the Blue Green Water-vow to continue protecting their sacred land in hopes that real reforms can be made to mining operations in the US. "The harder the battle, the sweeter the victory," said Jones.