

TELLURIDE DAILY PLANET

Uranium mining called into question

Sheep Mountain fights ruling to expand Sunday Mines

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A slew of environmental agencies are protesting a Bureau of Land Management decision that would allow expanded uranium mining in the Big Gypsum Valley, hoping for, at the very least, a deeper review.

In late January, the BLM issued a Finding of No Significant Impact and Decision Record for expanded mining at the Sunday Mines complex, meaning its bolstered operation will have “no significant impact” on the environment surrounding it.

Denison Mines Corporation, a Canadian company, hopes to expand its existing holdings in the Big Gypsum Valley. New activities at the complex — which lies near Naturita — would include the expansion of waste rock areas and the addition of vent holes along with access roads and additional drilling.

The existing land disturbance at the complex is about 80 acres; the proposed new surface disturbance would affect about 20 additional acres of public land in the area.

Local environmental group Sheep Mountain Alliance, along with the Colorado Environmental Coalition, the Information Network for Responsible Mining and the Center for Biological Diversity filed a petition disputing that finding with the BLM's state office on Monday.

Over the course of 26 pages, the filing disputes the BLM's review process, painting it as inadequate on environmental and socioeconomic levels. The petition also calls for a cumulative review of uranium mining's impacts across the region and says the BLM's environmental review defers important analysis — such as effects on water quality and mitigation measures — to a later date.

“We’re willing to take this all the way to the federal level, because we feel very strongly the need to address overall impacts,” said SMA's Executive Director Hilary White. Until a more thorough analysis, “everything needs to be put on hold.”

Jamie Sellar-Baker, the Dolores Public Lands Office associate manager who signed the finding that would allow for increased operations at the Sunday Mines, did not return a call for comment Wednesday.

In the summer of 2007, the Department of Energy announced its intent to renew active uranium leases in southwest Colorado for 10 years, effectively rolling out the welcome mat for mining companies.

The Sunday Mines lie in the Uravan Mineral Belt, which arcs west from here to Utah through the bust town of Uravan. The resource is as storied as the industry itself, as some of its ore went toward the Manhattan Project.