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Groups sue over Colo. uranium program

The Associated Press

DENVER -- Environmental groups have filed a federal lawsuit claiming that a program clearing the way for uranium mines in western Colorado is illegal.

The lawsuit filed Thursday in U.S. District in Denver says the Department of Energy's environmental analysis of the leasing program on federal land last year was inadequate. The groups want the court to make DOE do a more comprehensive analysis of the impacts of past uranium mining and potential impacts of new mines.

"Before supporting a whole other boom-and-bust uranium cycle in western Colorado, maybe they should think about it a little bit more," said Amy Atwood of the Center for Biological Diversity, one of four groups suing the federal government.

DOE officials didn't return a phone call for comment on the lawsuit.

The area covers 42 square miles near Dolores River Canyon in southwest Colorado. The land is part of the Uravan Mineral Belt, a major uranium producing area in the 1940s and 1950s. Some of the material for the nation's first nuclear weapons came from the area.

Uranium prices plummeted in the 1980s and 1990s. Now, rising uranium prices are spurring a flurry of applications for uranium claims.

The Bureau of Land Management received 10,730 applications last year to develop federally owned uranium reserves in Colorado. The total was 5,205 in 2006 and only 120 in 2003.

Travis Stills of the Energy Minerals Law Center, which is representing the environmental groups, said he believes the rush of applications is being fed in part by the DOE's decision to expand the leasing program. The agency concluded last year that the mining would have no significant environmental impacts.

He said the analysis was inadequate and didn't detail the environmental problems, including contamination and waste, from previous uranium mining.

Environmentalists have also complained that the DOE didn't release key information needed to assess the expanded leasing program until the process was completed. The groups sued to get some of the documents and are waiting for a decision on another request filed under the federal Freedom of Information Act.

The DOE renewed 13 existing leases and approved 16 new 10-year leases in July. A uranium mill has been proposed near Paradox.

The environmental groups say in their lawsuit that the potential environmental effects haven't been adequately considered as required by federal law. They say runoff from the public lands at issue flow into the Dolores River, a tributary of the Colorado River, a primary source of water in the Southwest. The two rivers provide habitat for river otters, bald eagles and four federally protected fish species.