



MINING: Sporting groups push for ban on Grand Canyon uranium activities

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Sporting and hunting groups are joining a chorus of environmentalists in urging Interior Secretary Ken Salazar to keep uranium mining away from Grand Canyon National Park.

The groups are voicing support for one of four options in a draft environmental impact statement (EIS) that would withdraw up to 1 million acres of federal land near the Grand Canyon from uranium and other hardrock mining activity for 20 years.

The withdrawals would include two Bureau of Land Management parcels north of the national park in the Arizona Strip and the Kaibab National Forest, and one parcel south of the Grand Canyon also inside the national forest.

“The public lands near the canyon have been valued for generations by hunters and other visitors. To allow uranium mining operations there, with resulting pollution, noisy truck traffic and other significant threats to habitats, would be criminal,” said John Koleszar, president of the Arizona Deer Association and a board member of the Arizona Sportsmen for Wildlife.

It would also ruin big-game hunting, said Steve Clark, president of the Arizona Elk Society, and that is “unacceptable” to the group’s members, who are “firmly in opposition to any advancement in mining in this region.”

Mining activity could also contaminate waterways, ruining the world-class trout fishing in the region, said James Stipe, chairman of the Arizona Council of Trout Unlimited.

The “Northern Arizona Proposed Withdrawal Draft Environmental Impact Statement,” released last week and open for public comment through April 3, also includes an option to leave the land in question open for mining, as well as two more modest options to withdraw mining for 20 years on 650,000 and 300,000 acres, respectively.

Salazar, who in July 2009 issued a two-year moratorium on new mining claims on the parcels while the EIS was being drafted, is expected to make a final decision on the plan this summer. Any decision to withdraw lands from mining will not affect already approved mining activities in the areas or those that were under review before the two-year moratorium.

Even without additional mining activity, uranium pollution already plagues the Grand Canyon region, according to the Sierra Club’s Grand Canyon Chapter in Arizona.

“The only sure way to prevent pollution of the Grand Canyon is to prevent uranium mining,” said Taylor McKinnon, public lands campaigns director at the Center for Biological Diversity in Flagstaff, Ariz.

But despite the protests to increased mining, it is not entirely clear that uranium mining has caused -- or would cause -- as much damage as some environmental groups claim.

The U.S. Geological Survey released a study last year that found streams and groundwater surrounding former uranium mines near the Grand Canyon show little or no signs of elevated radioactivity (Land Letter, Feb. 25, 2010).

Industry officials maintain that uranium can be mined in the region in a safe and clean manner and that limiting new mining in the Grand Canyon would harm U.S. energy and economic security (E&ENews PM, Feb. 17).

The USGS researchers, in their report last year, found an estimated 326 million pounds of uranium oxide densely packed in underground formations known as “breccia pipes” in the area under consideration for withdrawal. Their report estimated there could be hundreds of these formations holding rich deposits of copper, silver, lead, zinc, cobalt and nickel.

But developing these resources is not worth the environmental risk, said Roger Clark, director of air quality and clean energy programs for the Grand Canyon Trust. “Tourism, not mining, is the mainstay of our region’s economy,” he said.



After a two-year moratorium on new mining claims in the Grand Canyon region, the Interior Department has issued an draft environmental impact statement detailing how mining might resume under new conditions. Photo courtesy of NPS.