

Uranium-mining ban is extended

Feds hint at 20-year halt of new claims near Canyon

by Shaun McKinnon

The Obama administration dug in its heels Monday against the expansion of uranium mining on public lands near the Grand Canyon, extending a short-term ban on new claims and renewing support for longer-term limits.

Interior Secretary Ken Salazar traveled to the Canyon with other high-ranking officials to announce the decisions, based on choices, he said, that “could profoundly affect the Grand Canyon in ways we do not yet understand.”

Salazar talked about the negative effects of new mines on the region’s tourism economy and the opposition of Indian tribes who live near the canyon, but threats to the environment and specifically to the water supply clearly played an important role in the decision.

Uranium mines active a decade ago were blamed for polluting the ground

and water, and while mining companies say the industry is far more responsible now, Salazar said more study is needed to assure protection of the Canyon.

The temporary moratorium on new mining claims will remain in place through Dec. 20 on about 1 million acres surrounding the canyon, Salazar said. Meantime, federal officials will complete a review of a proposal to withdraw the land from new mining activities for 20 years.

The endorsement of the most sweeping of several proposals under consideration was especially significant. The administration had not indicated a preference when draft documents were released earlier this year, leaving open the possibility that fewer acres would be placed off-limits.

Reaction was sharply divided and underscored the high stakes in a debate that seems headed for Congress. Conservation groups said the decisions would protect the Canyon from the ecological and

economic risks of extracting uranium, but critics accused President Barack Obama of stifling economic growth in ailing northern Arizona communities.

Salazar was facing a deadline of July 20, the expiration date of a two-year moratorium on new mining activities that he issued in 2009. Federal officials had hoped to complete an environmental-impact statement on a potential long-term ban before the July deadline, but it became clear in recent weeks that finishing the detailed review was impossible.

With the Canyon as a backdrop, Salazar invoked the words of John Wesley Powell, who first explored the Canyon, and Theodore Roosevelt, the president who first gave the Canyon its protected status, and said decisions about the park and its resources should be made with “caution, wisdom and science.”

He was joined by Bob Abbey, director of the Bureau of Land Management; Jon Jarvis,

director of the National Park Service; and Marcia McNutt, director of the U.S. Geological Survey. All three agencies are working on the review of the 20-year ban.

Salazar noted that neither the temporary ban nor any long-term action would affect valid existing claims on the 1 million acres of public lands. There is currently one active uranium mine, but federal officials estimate there is the potential for as many as 11 to open and operate over the next 20 years.

Under federal law, Salazar can withdraw public lands from mining activities for up to 20 years, but only Congress can make the ban permanent. U.S. Rep. Raúl Grijalva, D-Ariz., has introduced legislation to do just that, but he acknowledged Monday the lack of support for his bill, which stalled even when Democrats controlled both houses of Congress.

“The permanent withdrawal would be ideal, but it hasn’t received the support it should in the House,” Grijalva said. “Its time will come. This is a huge step on the part of the administration. There’s a lot at stake here.”

Conservation groups applauded Salazar for taking steps to protect the Canyon’s ecological resources.

“The world would never forgive the permanent pollution of the Grand Canyon’s precious aquifers and springs or the industrialization of its surrounding wildlands,” said Randy Serraglio of the Tucson-based Center for Biological Diversity.

“The only sure way to prevent pollution of the Grand Canyon is to prevent uranium mining, and today’s action makes important progress toward that goal.”

In supporting a long-term ban, advocacy groups often cited widespread contamination from uranium mines that operated in the region during the 1950s and 1960s.

“Uranium mining in the Grand Canyon eco-region has a history of land and water contamination,” said Matt Skroch, executive director of the Arizona Wilderness Coalition. “Given the wilderness resources of this vast region, the secretary’s announcement will help ensure we don’t spoil the crown jewel of Arizona and our country.”

Mining foes had recruited a broad base of groups lobbying Salazar, including Indian tribes who consider the Canyon sacred and cities that rely on the more than 4 million annual visitors and the \$700 million they inject into the regional economy.

“Tourism is the economic engine for northern Arizona’s economy, and the secretary’s decision today protects thousands of jobs as well as America’s most iconic natural treasure,” said Roger Clark, who works on the issue for the Flagstaff-based Grand Canyon Trust

But Salazar’s announcement drew rebukes from other Arizona lawmakers and industry groups.

“The Bureau of Land Management has provided no evidence that mining activities in areas outside the existing park pose a risk to resources within the Grand Canyon National Park,” said Katie Sweeney, general counsel of the National Mining Association. She called the decision arbitrary and one that “has consequences for nearly 300,000 people in Arizona still looking for work.”

Mining supporters say the jobs and other revenue from mining operations are badly needed and insist that the threat to tourism is overstated. Environmental groups have challenged the estimates of the mining industry's potential contributions.

U.S. Rep. Paul Gosar, R-Ariz., whose district includes part of the Canyon, accused the Obama administration of undermining economic growth and energy independence by locking up such a large uranium resource.

"The uranium found in these areas represents some of the best high-grade ore bodies in the world, and it is important the U.S. uses domestic resources to meet this growing demand," Gosar said. "The implementation of this withdrawal makes it certain none of the economic potential in the area will be realized."

U.S. Rep. Jeff Flake, R-Ariz., said he planned to add language to the Interior Department's appropriations bill that would block Salazar from imposing the 20-year ban.

Gov. Jan Brewer cited experts who believe uranium can be mined safely and securely, and she urged the Obama administration to reconsider its decision.

"I want to see the Grand Canyon region flourish and the economy thrive," Brewer said. "With a balanced federal policy with respect to uranium mining, both are possible."