



GRAND CANYON: Interior likely to extend uranium-mining ban

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The Interior Department is expected to announce the extension today of a ban on new uranium mining near the Grand Canyon, according to several sources close to negotiations on the moratorium.

With a two-year moratorium on new hardrock mining claims near the canyon set to expire next month, conservationists have pushed Interior to block claims on 1 million acres for 20 more years. The option was the most restrictive of several proposals that the department outlined in an draft environmental impact statement in February (E&ENews PM, Feb 17).

Carol Raulston, spokeswoman for the National Mining Association, said in an email today that all signs point to Interior leaning toward the 20-year moratorium. "The optics, announcement at the Grand Canyon and invitation to member of Congress all indicate an announcement on the dramatic end of the spectrum," she said.

Interior Secretary Ken Salazar is scheduled to make the announcement this afternoon at Grand Canyon National Park in Arizona along with Bureau of

Land Management Director Bob Abbey, National Park Service Director Jon Jarvis and U.S. Geological Survey Director Marcia McNutt.

"We anticipate the message to be a good one," Carletta Tilousi, Havasupai Tribe council member, said in an email. She plans on being at the announcement along with other tribal leaders. "We are keeping our hopes up, and anticipate good news at the rim of the Grand Canyon."

Several sources confirmed that Rep. Raúl Grijalva (D-Ariz.) -- a strong proponent of the million-acre, 20-year withdrawal and sponsor of legislation (H.R. 855) to make a ban on new mining permanent -- is also set to attend. He has been told, one source said, that he would be pleased with the result.

"It looks like it's going to be the full withdrawal announcement," the source said. "I can't imagine it would be anything other than a full withdrawal."

Sources say it is also possible Salazar may announce another temporary moratorium to give BLM more time to evaluate

the long-term ban on new claims. BLM extended the comment period for the draft EIS from April 4 to May 4, and the agency received more than 300,000 comments about the various options outlined in the document.

The legality of another short-term withdrawal has been in question. But environmentalists, citing a decision by the U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia, say Salazar can institute another two-year segregation as long as it is for a different stated purpose.

Conservationists say the Grand Canyon is in peril, with companies staking more than 8,000 mining claims in public land around the park since 2004 (Greenwire, April 15). American Indians and communities that depend on the Colorado River for drinking water are also expressing concerns.

The mining industry maintains that not all claims will come to fruition and stresses that there is an already existing buffer zone to protect the Grand Canyon from mining. Industry officials say the United States should be encouraging more domestic resource production, including uranium to fuel power plants.

While a new ban would not affect current operations or existing claims, conservationists say they are ready to go to court to fight the validity of some of those claims in their effort to stop new mining.

Congress can also step in to undo Interior's decision. Recently, more than 60 Democrats wrote a letter in support of a full 20-year, million-acre land withdrawal. But Arizona Republicans, especially Reps. Paul Gosar and Trend Franks, whose districts are directly affected by the moratorium, have expressed strong opposition to a new ban