



## GRAND CANYON: Groups pressure Interior on hardrock-lease withdrawal

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Environmentalists are urging the Obama administration to withdraw 1 million acres from new hardrock mining claims near the Grand Canyon.

Actor Robert Redford, filmmaker Ken Burns, Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa (D) and Phoenix Mayor Phil Gordon (D) are among 50 advocates who signed an open letter urging President Obama to “please extend the mining claim moratorium and protect all one million acres of public land surrounding the Grand Canyon National Park.”

“A trip to the Grand Canyon is an American birthright and the watershed is irreplaceable to tens of millions in the Southwest,” Gordon said in a statement. The advocates say the letter will run as a full-page ad this week in The New York Times.

The Interior Department is considering several options, ranging from doing nothing to protecting 300,000, 650,000 or 1 million acres (E&ENews PM, Feb. 17). The current two-year moratorium on a million acres around the park expires next month.

Pollution of the Colorado River watershed from uranium mining is among the primary concerns of those who are urging Interior to block mining claims. At stake, they say, is the drinking water of more than 25 million people.

Water providers -- including the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California and the Southern Nevada Water Authority -- sent the Bureau of Land Management and Interior Secretary Ken Salazar a letter Friday expressing concerns about new mining.

Last month, more than 60 Democratic lawmakers also urged Interior to provide full protection to the area. Among the lawmakers who signed the letter is Arizona Rep. Raúl Grijalva, who is sponsoring legislation to make permanent the ban on new hardrock mining claims around the canyon.

Republicans have objected to the full million-acre proposal. Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) has spoken out against the plan. And in a recent interview, Rep. Jeff Flake (R-Ariz.) said,

“The initial proposal that was done a couple of years ago took too much land out.”

While Flake said he wants to protect the canyon, the million-acre withdrawal could hurt the economy, he warned. “I think we can find a proper balance,” he said.

The National Mining Association wants the Obama administration to let the moratorium expire in July and keep the land open to new mining. It says the Grand Canyon National Park already enjoys a buffer zone for protection and cites BLM’s own findings to say damage to water supplies would be nonexistent or negligible.

### Mining already occurring

Meanwhile, opponents of uranium mining near the Grand Canyon experienced a setback late last month when Arizona U.S. District Court Judge David Campbell ruled in favor of a mine already operating in the area, the only one.

Conservation advocates, including the Center for Biological Diversity and Native American tribes, wanted mining to stop at the Arizona 1 mine until new environmental reviews could be conducted. Taylor McKinnon, public lands campaign director for CBD, said the groups would likely take their case to the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals.

“What BLM is doing here, authorizing renewed mining on the banks of the Grand Canyon while refusing to update 1980s-era environmental reviews, is plainly wrong,” McKinnon said in a statement. “The public doesn’t support it, it defies common sense and it flies in the face of the spirit of the proposed mineral withdrawal.”

Denison Mines Corp. restarted operations at the Arizona 1 mine in 2009 after it had been idle for years. The Canadian based company is also seeking to extract uranium elsewhere near the Grand Canyon