

## MINING:

### Arizona issues permits for Grand Canyon uranium projects

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The Arizona Department of Environmental Quality has issued permits to three uranium mining projects around the Grand Canyon, including areas targeted for protection by environmentalists and some lawmakers.

Toronto-based Denison Mines Corp., with U.S. headquarters in Denver, has received three air permits and one aquifer protection permit for its Pineut, EZ and Canyon mining projects. The Pineut and EZ mines are located north of Grand Canyon National Park. The Canyon mine is to the south.

Environmentalists with the Sierra Club, Grand Canyon Trust and Center for Biological Diversity plan to appeal the decision, saying state authorities failed to account for the mines' environmental impacts.

“Given the potential threat to the groundwater and ultimately the seeps and springs of Grand Canyon, it is outrageous that the Arizona Department of Environmental Quality is not requiring the most stringent protections and is moving forward with permitting this mine under a permit that is supposed to be for activities that pose little threat to the aquifer,” Alicyn Gitlin, with the Sierra Club’s Grand Canyon Chapter, said in a statement.



Uranium mining has long been controversial in places like northern Arizona, where environmentalists fear the industry's legacy of pollution will extend to newly permitted mines near the Grand Canyon. Photo courtesy of USGS.

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Environmentalists also say the state is ignoring widespread public opposition to the project. At a public hearing in Flagstaff, Ariz., earlier this year, Dawn Hubbs, a representative of the Hualapai Tribe, expressed opposition to mining projects on land she said has cultural and historical ties to the tribe.

“The Hualapai Nation formally expresses our opposition to the resurrection of uranium mining by the Denison Mines Corporation and all other uranium mining adjacent to, in, around or near the Grand Canyon,” Hubbs said.

In a written response to public comment, the Arizona DEQ defended the permits from activist and resident concerns.

“Arizona State Statutes and laws require the Department to issue permits if the applicant is able to demonstrate that they will comply with all applicable environmental regulations,” the document read. “The Air Quality Permit and APP will ensure that the air is safe to breathe and the water is safe to drink.”

Still, environmentalists said the state failed to require uranium dust or water protection monitoring.

“State regulators in Arizona can’t guarantee that mining won’t contaminate regional aquifers. If that happens it would be impossible to clean up, and the damage would be permanent,” Taylor McKinnon, Center for Biological Diversity Public Lands Campaigns director, said in a statement. “The state of Arizona is playing a foolish game of Russian roulette with a precious and irreplaceable resource.”

Federal permits are still necessary for the mines to proceed.

In late 2009, the Interior Department instituted a two-year moratorium of new mining claims in the area while officials studied the environmental effects of hardrock exploration and mining.

Last month, the department began seeking public comment on a broader plan that could set aside up to a million acres from new hardrock mining projects for 20 years (E&ENews PM, Feb. 17). And earlier this month, Rep. Raúl Grijalva (D-Ariz.), a strong proponent of Grand Canyon conservation efforts, introduced legislation to permanently block new mining projects from the area (E&E Daily, March 3).

If Interior approves a long-term moratorium, claims within the area would be subject to a “validity determination,” according to Arizona officials.

The mining industry is highly critical of the efforts to prohibit

new mining near the Grand Canyon. Industry officials say environmentalists are jeopardizing the United States’ energy and mineral independence.

“Uranium is used to produce nuclear energy, and the United States currently imports approximately 90 percent of the uranium it uses to produce energy. Russia is a major supplier,” according to a National Mining Association statement on the issue.