

Colorado: Feds agree to study impacts of uranium mining

Lawsuit by conservation groups triggers full-scale review of potential pollution and impacts to endangered species near the Dolores and San Miguel rivers

by Bob Berwyn

SUMMIT COUNTY — Facing a court challenge from conservation groups, the U.S. Department of Energy says it will conduct an in-depth analysis of the environmental impacts of uranium mining and milling in southwestern Colorado.

The environmental impact statement will evaluate and disclose the potential effects of the department's uranium-leasing program on 42 square miles of public land near the Dolores and San Miguel rivers.

In a lawsuit that's still pending, the conservation groups challenged the Department's current leasing program for not complying with the federal environmental laws.

Although the Department of Energy now concedes the need for a new and expanded environmental review, the federal agency continues to implement the program under the original flawed approval. In fact, it has awarded or renewed 31 leases for mining-related activities on 25,000 acres.



Facing a lawsuit, federal agencies have agreed to take an in-depth look at the potential impacts of uranium mining in southwest Colorado.

"The Department of Energy knows its previous environmental reviews fell short and yet leasing for uranium operations has moved forward. That badly flawed approach jeopardizes human health, wildlife and two of the West's most precious rivers," said Taylor McKinnon of the Center for Biological Diversity. "The feds' refusal to revoke approvals and leases they've admitted are flawed is inherently dishonest and will keep everyone in court."

Uranium mining and milling resulting from the lease program will deplete Colorado River basin water and threaten to pollute rivers with uranium, selenium, ammonia, arsenic, molybdenum, aluminum, barium, copper, iron, lead, manganese, vanadium and zinc.

Selenium and arsenic contamination in the Colorado River basin from abandoned uranium-mining operations have been implicated in the decline of four endangered Colorado River fish species and may be impeding their recovery.

“Even small amounts of some of these pollutants, like selenium, can poison fish, accumulate in the food chain and cause deformities and reproductive problems for endangered fish, ducks, river otters and eagles,” said Josh Pollock of the Center for Native Ecosystems. “It is irresponsible for the Department of Energy to put fish and wildlife at risk by allowing uranium leases without adequate analysis of necessary protections to prevent pollution.”

“Combined with the activities in the DOE leasing tracts, the impacts of new mining on unpatented claims in the area and the proposed Piñon Ridge Uranium Mill in Paradox Valley all add up to serious new concerns for water quality,” said Hilary White of the Sheep Mountain Alliance. “We have to understand and mitigate existing contamination problems in the area before the government allows new mining to ramp up.”

The Colorado Environmental Coalition, Information Network for Responsible Mining, Center for Native Ecosystems, Center for Biological Diversity and Sheep Mountain Alliance sued the Department of Energy and Bureau of

Land Management in July 2008 for approving the program without analyzing the full environmental impacts from individual uranium-mining leases and for failing to ensure protection of threatened and endangered species prior to authorizing the program. The groups are represented by attorneys Travis Stills of the Energy Minerals Law Center and Jeff Parsons at the Western Mining Action Project.

DOE will take public comment on its new environmental impact statement until Sept. 9. Comments will also be accepted at public meetings Aug. 8-11 in Telluride, Naturita, San Juan County, Utah, and Montrose.