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PUBLIC LANDS: Interior EIS favors blocking new uranium mining claims

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E&E reporter

The Bureau of Land Management released a final environmental study today that favors the agency's plan to withdraw about 1 million uranium mining claims for the next 20 years from the area around the Grand Canyon.

"Uranium remains an important part of our nation's comprehensive energy resources, but it is appropriate to pause, identify what the predicted level of mining and its impacts on the Grand Canyon would be, and decide what level of risk is acceptable to take with this national treasure," BLM Director Bob Abbey said in a statement that accompanied the final environmental impact statement (EIS).

The lease withdrawals, the report says, are in reaction to the growth in uranium claims near the canyon.

Environmentalists called the release of the final EIS a milestone in their effort to prevent new uranium mines.

"We commend the Obama administration for honoring its commitment to protect the Grand Canyon from new uranium mining around its borders," said Jane Danowitz, public lands director for the Pew Environment Group.

The tourism industry and communities downstream from the canyon that depend on water from the Colorado River have expressed concerns about the potential impacts of uranium mining. But the mining industry has said the government has failed to present evidence backing the ban.

"The original draft EIS did not support a withdrawal, certainly not one this expansive," the National Mining Association said in a statement. "We will read the revised EIS with great interest to ensure BLM can support such far-reaching action."

The public will have 30 days to comment on the final EIS before Interior Secretary Ken Salazar makes a final decision.

Among other options for BLM, the document says, are withdrawing fewer acres or doing nothing.

Even if the full proposed withdrawal is approved, current valid mining claims would not be affected. Interior expects mining to increase in the area.

Republicans are looking to prevent the Obama administration from taking action on the plan. Next week, the House Natural Resources Committee will hold a hearing on a bill (H.R. 3155) to block the withdrawal. A similar measure is pending in the Senate.

"The department's proposed mining withdrawal would kill hundreds of potential jobs to 'save' the Grand Canyon from the same form of uranium mining that conservation groups once supported," Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) said in a recent statement, referring to a previous land-use deal for the area.

Interior says a full withdrawal would have almost no impact on job creation.

"The GOP detractors are just shilling for foreign mining corporations," Taylor McKinnon, public lands director for the Center for Biological Diversity, said in a statement. "They don't represent the vast majority of the public that supports these protections, and they surely don't represent the best interests of Grand Canyon National Park, its biodiversity or the regional tourism economy."