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No New Uranium Mines Near Grand Canyon

By Melissa C. Lott

The arm wrestling match over job creation and environmental conservation continues.

One example is the recent announcement regarding new uranium mining near the world's most famous gorge. According to Interior Secretary Ken Salazar, the U.S. federal government will implement a 20-year ban on new mining claims in areas surrounding the Grand Canyon. In his announcement, Salazar explained that the Grand Canyon's "priceless landscape" deserved protection from uranium mining, to the applause of environmental groups and eco-tourists.

The embargo extends a 2009 interim ban by the Interior Department that's almost expired.

"A withdrawal is the right approach for this priceless American landscape," said Salazar. "People from all over the country and around the world come to visit the Grand Canyon. Numerous American Indian tribes regard this magnificent icon as a sacred place and millions of people in the Colorado River Basin depend on the river for drinking water, irrigation, industrial and environmental use."

The lands are located in Mohave and Coconino Counties of Northern Arizona and encompass one million acres. The area is already home to about 3,000 mining claims, which will not be impacted by this new ban.



While the Canyon's fragile ecosystem and \$3.5 billion tourist industry are now more secure under the moratorium, opposition to the ban, including Arizona Senator John McCain, lament its impact on uranium production and in turn, job creation. In a state suffering from an 8.7% unemployment rate (the nation's average is 8.5%), the land surrounding the Grand Canyon represents a rich potential job resource. All told, this area holds about 40 percent of the country's uranium, valued to be in the billions of dollars.

Uranium, the primary fuel source for nuclear power plants, could be used to produce fuel for the nation's more than 100 gigawatt nuclear power plant fleet.

But, to Taylor McKinnon, the public lands campaign director at the Arizona-based Center for Biological Diversity "...the real economic engine in northern Arizona is not uranium mining. It's tourism... to jeopardize our economic engine with more toxic uranium is unacceptable."

Questions exist about the validity of possible uranium contamination to the environment, and more specifically the Colorado River, underscoring the difficult nature of the ensuring both environmental protection and employment. But, for now, caution is the name of the game – and the ban on mining near the world's most famous gorge will stay in effect.