

The Grand Canyon Region Deserves a Permanent Uranium Mining Ban

In 2012, Department of the Interior Secretary Salazar banned new uranium mining across 1 million acres surrounding Grand Canyon for 20 years.¹ The “mineral withdrawal” bans new mining claims, exploration, and mining--except for pre-existing valid mining rights—to protect Grand Canyon’s watersheds from new uranium mining pollution.² Despite widespread public support for the ban,³ and despite a 70-year legacy of uranium mining pollution in the region,⁴⁵ Mojave County Commissioners are now pushing the Trump administration to allow new mining.

The Uranium Industry’s Legacy of Deadly Pollution

Past uranium mining in the region has polluted soils, washes, aquifers, and drinking water.⁶ Hundreds of abandoned uranium mines still await clean-up, including more than 500 on the Navajo Nation.⁷ More than forty water samples—including from the Pigeon, Canyon and Hermit Mines—have been reported to exceed EPA’s drinking water limits for dissolved uranium.⁸⁹ Wind and rain have moved contaminants away from some mines,¹⁰ and floods have swept ore and waste rock far downstream from others.¹¹ In one recent settlement, the cost of reclaiming a mine averaged about \$19 million.¹² In many cases, clean-up costs are left entirely to the public; the Orphan Mine, located *within* Grand Canyon National Park, has already cost taxpayers \$15 million.

The Uranium Industry’s Dismal Safety Record

Over the past decade, Denison Mines and Energy Fuels Resources Inc., owners of 11 uranium mines and a mill in the region, have been cited 580 times for safety violations and fined more than \$220,000.¹³ That’s an average of more than one citation per week for an entire decade. In 2017 the Canyon Mine, near the South Rim, flooded – and water in the mine’s waste water pond measured 130 parts per billion of uranium¹⁴ – which is 433% *more* than EPA’s drinking water limit. Bystanders filmed the company spraying that water into the air and adjacent national forest.¹⁵

¹ Record of Decision Northern Arizona Withdrawal, Mohave and Coconino Counties, Arizona, 2 (2012) (“2012 ROD”).

² 2012 ROD at 9.

³ Northern Arizona Proposed Withdrawal, Final Environmental Impact Statement Vol 2 of 2, Table 5.6-2 Total Number Form Letters by Submittal and Organization, at page 327 of PDF (2011) (“2011 FEIS Vol 2”). At least 95 percent of the 296,461 public comments submitted during the public process leading up to this 1 million acre withdrawal were in support.

⁴ Alpine, Andrea E. ed., 2010, Hydrological, Geological, and Biological Site Characterization of Breccia Pipe Uranium Deposits in Northern Arizona: U.S. Geological Survey Scientific Investigations Report 2010-5025, 129-130, 153, 183-184 (“2010 USGS Report”) (finding elevated radioactivity and water contamination due to past uranium activities).

⁵ <http://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2016/04/10/473547227/for-the-navajo-nation-uranium-minings-deadly-legacy-lingers>.

⁶ 2010 USGS Report at 129-130; <https://www.epa.gov/navajo-nation-uranium-cleanup/cleaning-abandoned-uranium-mines>.

⁷ <https://www.epa.gov/navajo-nation-uranium-cleanup/cleaning-abandoned-uranium-mines>

⁸ 2010 USGS Report Appendix 4 at 249-281 (compilation of dissolved uranium data from springs, wells, surface water, and mine sumps and shafts in northern Arizona).

⁹ 2010 USGS Report at 184.

¹⁰ 2010 USGS at 49-50.

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² <https://www.epa.gov/newsreleases/justice-department-epa-and-navajo-nation-announce-settlement-cleanup-94-abandoned>

¹³ <https://arlweb.msha.gov/drs/ASP/OprNameStatesearch.asp>.

¹⁴ Water Has Built Up in Uranium Mine Near Grand Canyon. Now What? USA Today Network, Ron Dungan, The Arizona Republic (Apr. 4, 2017); <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/arizona/articles/2017-04-04/water-accumulates-at-uranium-mine-near-grand-canyon>.

¹⁵ *Id.*

Uranium Mining Threatens Sacred Sites and Vital Water Sources

Even with the 20-year ban, old uranium mines have been allowed to restart. The Canyon Mine, only six miles south of Grand Canyon, is entirely within the Red Butte Traditional Cultural Property – a place of critical religious and cultural importance to several tribes, especially the Havasupai. Because of its threat to Red Butte and groundwater feeding Havasu Creek, the Havasupai tribe sued over the mine's original 1986 approval. Above-ground infrastructure was built in the early 1990s but a crash in uranium prices caused the mine's closure in 1992 before the shaft or ore bodies could be excavated. For threats to water and other sacred places, and for a history of deadly pollution that still afflicts many tribal communities, all regional tribes – including Havasupai, Hopi, Navajo, Hualapai, Zuni, and others – have supported the uranium mining ban near Grand Canyon. The Navajo Nation, which is the largest tribe in the U.S., prohibits all uranium development on its tribal lands.

The Uranium Industry Threatens the Tourism Economy

Grand Canyon National Park is the anchor for the Southwest's tourism economy. In 2015 tourism bought in \$542 million in spending – including \$19.8 million in local taxes to Mohave County – and a total of \$44.7 million in local and state taxes combined (figures in 2017 dollars).¹⁶ That same year, travel generated 6,460 jobs, up nearly 1,000 from the number of such jobs in 1998.¹⁷ In 2016, Grand Canyon National Park saw 5,969,811 visits, which generated \$648,171,000 in spending, 9,779 jobs and \$434,220,000 in income.¹⁸ More uranium mining would threaten the Grand Canyon region's growing tourism industry by industrializing iconic landscapes, filling already crowded highways with radioactive haul trucks, and stigmatizing the region with more pollution.

The Public Supports a Permanent Uranium Mining Ban

Nonpartisan polls in 2016 show that 80% of Arizona voters and 80% of Americans nationwide support permanent protection from new uranium mining for lands in the Grand Canyon region.¹⁹ Overwhelming public consensus acknowledges that enough is enough—the Grand Canyon Region needs to be permanently protected from unnecessary and unwanted destruction from uranium mining. It's time to permanently protect the Grand Canyon region to prevent foolish politicians and mining companies from destroying this iconic, sacred, and irreplaceable landscape.

¹⁶ Dean Runyan Associates at 38-39, 52, 71.

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ Rasker, Ray, Economic Impact of National Parks, Headwaters Economics (2017)

<https://headwaterseconomics.org/dataviz/national-park-service-units/>.

¹⁹ <http://www.grandcanyontrust.org/poll-voters-nationwide-strongly-Grand-Canyon-monument>.