

Mining, Indian leaders disagree on uranium mine effects

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Indian leaders, scientists, business interests and the superintendent of the Grand Canyon warned Friday of dire consequences if uranium mining is allowed to proceed near the national park. Mining advocates minimized any likely problems.

At a congressional field hearing held in Flagstaff, proponents of a measure to ban mining around the Grand Canyon said the canyon is a national treasure worthy of protection from the impacts of such activity.

Rep. Raúl Grijalva, D-Ariz., who chaired the House Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands, has sponsored a bill to ban a million acres near the Grand Canyon from mineral exploration under the 1872 Mining Act.

In advance of the hearing, Grijalva said it would focus on "the need to buffer this icon, the Grand Canyon, from very harmful activity around it."

He said he introduced the legislation because the number of categorical waivers and expedited mining permits has jumped about 10 times in recent years. "That's been the process of the Interior Department, to process mining claims," he said.

For the Forest Service to allow such activity within a few miles of such a revered site as the Grand Canyon is outrageous, the congressman said.

"It is something that we depend on for visitors, for tourism. It's one of the wonders of the world, and here we are as the federal government allowing the distinct possibility of uranium mining around the Grand Canyon," Grijalva added.

Environmental groups sued the U.S. Forest Service earlier this month over its decision granting approval to VANE Minerals Group, a British mining company seeking commercial quantities of uranium ore, to drill at up to 39 sites on the Kaibab National Forest. The Kaibab sandwiches much of the Grand Canyon National Park.

Environmental advocates heavily outweighed mining proponents in the audience of more than 200.

Those testifying in favor of the legislation cited concerns ranging from the potential impact of radiation contamination on the watershed to the legacy and historic impact of past mining, which devastated Indian lands.

Mining proponents sought to assure congressional panelists that uranium mining today is far safer than how it was practiced more a half-century ago.

Kris Hefton, director of VANE Mineral U.S., said the industry needs to be judged on its current

performance rather than its history - emphasizing that mining today is much safer and cleaner.

Corbin Newman, regional forester for the U.S. Forest Service, defended his agency's action in giving the go-ahead to explore on the sites. He said the Forest Service had acted in accordance with the law in granting approval.

But when Steve Martin, superintendent of the national park, was questioned whether uranium mining represents a significant threat to the canyon, he replied "Yes." And asked to measure the risk on a scale of 1 to 10, Martin said, "Ten."

Leaders of the Navajo, Kaibab Paiute, Havasupai, Hualapai and Hopi tribes testified. They spoke about the history of uranium mining, the effects on their individual tribes, the mining industry's failure to clean up pollution from its old uranium mining and the inherent cultural importance on the Grand Canyon of its land and water to their people.

Kaibab Paiute chairwoman Ona Segundo said, "They promise the money. It looks good, then they go bankrupt or they leave and we're left with the cleanup." Officials also noted that the adverse impacts of previous uranium mining have compelled their tribes to ban new uranium mining development on their lands.

Chris Shuey, director of the Southwest Research Information Center in Albuquerque, N.M., said mining brings uranium to the surface and in the process its concentration is increased many times over its natural level.

Shuey said at least five radiological assessments by the National Park Service since the early 1980s at the site of a past mine - the Orphan Mine - have shown gamma radiation levels more than 450 times background levels inside the original fenced area and nearly 150 times normal on adjacent lands that tourists and park employees once routinely walked across on the South Rim foot path.

A three-strand wire fence encloses the much larger and highly contaminated area, he said.