

Editorial 03/30

### **We know the drill**

Uranium mines don't belong next door to one of the seven wonders of the natural world.

Yet a British mining company plans to drill exploratory holes on federal land within three miles of the Grand Canyon.

The U.S. Forest Service gave Vane Minerals Group the green light in December to drill at seven sites in the Kaibab National Forest.

Officials don't have a lot of leeway under the 1872 mining law, which still applies to gold, uranium and other hard-rock minerals. It gives mining precedence over other uses on federal land. Plus, there are no royalties for taking hard-rock minerals.

And we've heard just the first few clicks of the Geiger counter.

With skyrocketing uranium prices, there's a rush of mining claims in Kaibab. More than 2,000 have been filed in the Tusayan Ranger District, which borders the South Rim of the Canyon.

Once the exploratory drilling starts, full-scale mining is right behind. So is the potential for environmental damage and contamination. The area around the Grand Canyon is a complex water system, laced with seeps, springs and washes. At the base is the mighty Colorado River, supplying water to millions, including Valley residents.

Rep. Raul Grijalva, D-Ariz., hosted a congressional field hearing Friday on the question of uranium mining near the Canyon. Grand Canyon National Park Superintendent Steve Martin was asked to rank his level of concern, on a scale of one to 10, over the risks and unknown impacts.

His answer: 10.

The park has trouble already, he says, dealing with the toxic remains of uranium mining on the Canyon rim back in the 1960s.

Environmental groups filed a lawsuit to stop the Vane project and require an environmental analysis.

That's a stopgap. Grijalva has a long-term solution. He introduced legislation that would prohibit new mineral claims across 1 million acres of public lands in watersheds surrounding Grand Canyon National Park.

The federal land around the Canyon should be a buffer against Arizona's intense development pressures. It should provide an insulation of calm and quiet. It should be part of an integrated range in which elk, deer and other wildlife, which can't read boundary signs, may roam undisturbed. It certainly shouldn't be part of the problem.

The track record of uranium mining in northern Arizona isn't pretty, with elevated radiation levels in water and debris near old mines. Many blame those factors for high cancer rates in the area, especially on the Navajo Reservation. Three years ago, the tribe banned uranium mining.

The Coconino County Board of Supervisors voted to ask both the feds and the state to remove public land around the Canyon from potential mining.