

# TELLURIDE DAILY PLANET

## NEWS

### **DOE opens up review of uranium mining**

*Lawsuit from Sheep Mountain, other groups, prompts lengthy analysis*

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The U.S. Department of Energy will conduct a comprehensive analysis of the environmental impacts of uranium mining and milling in southwestern Colorado, after much prodding from environmental groups.

Until now, the DOE reviewed the mining operations piecemeal rather than addressing the cumulative impacts of increased production in the region, which it made possible in 2008 with the renewal of its leasing program in the Uravan Mineral Belt, awarding or renewing 31 leases for mining-related activities over 25,000 acres between Naturita and Moab, Utah.

In a pending lawsuit, the conservation groups — including Telluride's Sheep Mountain Alliance — challenged the Department's current leasing program for not complying with the National Environmental Policy Act and Endangered Species Act.

The study will examine the effects of the DOE's uranium-leasing program on 42 square miles of public land near the Dolores and San Miguel rivers. The DOE will host a public meeting in Telluride on Tuesday, Aug. 9 at the Sheridan Opera House from 6:30 to 9 p.m.

"Combined with the activities in the DOE leasing tracts, the impacts of new mining on unpatented claims in the area and the proposed Piñon Ridge Uranium Mill in Paradox Valley all add up to serious new concerns for water quality," said Hilary White of the Sheep Mountain Alliance. "We have to understand and mitigate existing contamination problems in the area before the government allows new mining to ramp up."

Attorneys Travis Stills of the Energy Minerals Law Center and Jeff Parsons at the Western Mining Action Project represent the groups.

Recently, the State of Colorado awarded Energy Fuels, a Canada-based company, a radioactive materials license, clearing the way for a mill in Paradox Valley.

Gary Steele, Energy Fuels' vice president, said the move by the DOE would put the brakes on any exploration the company hoped to conduct on any of its seven federal leases but that other endeavors, such as increased production at two existing mines on private claims, would persist.

"We're kind of disappointed at that, to say the least," Steele said, but also added that the study was a thoughtful endeavor in the longer run. "As far as the long term, it's probably a good idea to have this regional development looked at in its entirety." The mill would not be affected, Steele said.

The Uravan Mineral Belt is the richest swath of uranium deposits in the country, and ore from the belt, which runs from western Colorado to Utah, went into the Manhattan Project and spawned company towns — such as the now-leveled Uravan — along the way.

A total of 25,000 acres of land in southwestern Colorado, northern New Mexico, and southeastern Utah was withdrawn from the public domain during the late 1940s and early 1950s by the Atomic Energy Commission, the predecessor agency to the Department of Energy.

In 1948, the AEC included portions of regional lands in 48 mineral leases that were negotiated with adjacent mine owners/operators. This early leasing program ended in 1962, yielding more than 1.2 million pounds of uranium and 6.8 million pounds of vanadium and generating \$5.9 million in royalties to the federal government.

The DOE will take public comment on its new environmental impact statement until Sept. 9. Comments will also be accepted at public meetings Aug. 8-11 in Telluride, Naturita, Monticello, Utah, and Montrose.

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