

# The Salt Lake Tribune

## Group challenges expansion plan at Utah tar sands operation

BY BRADY MCCOMBS

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

PUBLISHED: FEBRUARY 18, 2015 08:49PM

UPDATED: FEBRUARY 18, 2015 06:45PM

An environmental protection organization is challenging Utah's decision to approve expansion at the state's first commercial tar sands mine.

An administrative challenge announced Wednesday by Western Resource Advocates marks the latest public opposition to a project that critics say is damaging the landscape and harming nearby drinking water at the eastern Utah oil sands operation.

The operation, called the PR Spring mine, is near the Book Cliffs in Uintah County more than 200 miles southeast of Salt Lake City.

Filed on behalf of Living Rivers, the challenge accuses the Utah Division of Water Quality of failing to do proper review of the expansion plan.

A new study shows the mine tailings will include dangerous levels of diesel compounds that exceed safe amounts for drinking water, said Rob Dubuc, staff attorney with Western Resource Advocates. The state should conduct additional testing and monitoring of the water, he said.

"It's just not appropriate for the state to give them a free pass on this," Dubuc said.

Utah Division of Water Quality spokeswoman Donna Spangler defended the agency's



David Self Newlin | The Salt Lake Tribune

Lionel Trepanier fills a water bag from a spring at the PR Springs campsite in eastern Utah. Utah Tar Sands Resistance is camping at PR Springs in what they call a permanent "protest vigil" in an effort to stop development of tar sands in the area.

decision in an emailed statement.

“Water Quality’s decision to allow U.S. Oil Sands to proceed with its project is based on scientific facts that have repeatedly been upheld throughout the legal system, including the Utah Supreme Court,” she said.

The company that runs the operation, Calgary-based U.S. Oil Sands, could not be immediately reached for comment.

The company has been working since 2005 to prepare the project and obtain all the necessary permits, according to the U.S. Oil Sands’ website. They project up to 100 jobs at the site over a decade and an influx of tens of millions of dollars to state tax coffers and the local economy, the website says. The company has invested more than \$35 million in the project over 9 years, the website says.

The challenge goes before an administrative law judge appointed by the state agency, Dubuc said. If Western Resource Advocates loses, they can appeal in state court, he said.

Since starting work in 2013, the operation has garnered resistance from several groups.

About 80 people associated with Utah Tar Sands Resistance took part in a July protest to bring attention to what they call destructive strip mining that could spread through the Uinta Basin should U.S. Oil Sands succeed.

Twenty-one people were charged in the protest. Prosecutors said they blocked a road, entered a fenced-off area and chained themselves to machinery near where Calgary-based U.S. Oil Sands was beginning work on a mine in the Book Cliffs area.

Dubuc said the operation is having irreversible effects.

“You can’t go back. You can’t recreate the environment again,” Dubuc said. “They are destroying the landscape.”

---

**© Copyright 2015 The Salt Lake Tribune. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed.**