

[print](#)

Groups appeal to block tar sands project

by Craig Bigler

contributing writer

09.30.10 - 09:38 am

A local group filed an appeal this week to stop a state agency from allowing a tar sands mining project in the Book Cliffs area of Grand and San Juan County. Moab-based Living Rivers, with legal assistance provided by Western Resource Advocates, announced the appeal in a Sept. 27 news release.

Approval of the project was granted by the director of the state Division of Oil, Gas and Mining, John Baza, on Sept. 13 after he found that UDOGM officials followed proper procedures and legal requirements in approving a permit for Earth Energy Resources to dig and process tar sands to gain bitumen, which can be refined into oil.

Western Resource Advocates (WRA) disagrees with Baza. In the news release, Peter Roessmann of Western Resource Advocates, states the basis for the appeal is that threats of both ground water and surface water contamination have not been thoroughly evaluated.

WRA claims that waste sand, once the product has been removed from it, "will still be wet with chemicals that can leach into groundwater" when it is dumped back into the pits it came from.

Additionally, the pits will not be adequately designed to prevent rainwater from washing chemicals into streams that flow into the Colorado River, WRA states.

Glen Snarr, president and chief operating officer for Earth Energy Resources of Calgary, Alberta, said his company has taken necessary precautions to ensure the process is safe. He said Earth Energy has developed a natural citrus based solvent to remove the oil-rich bitumen from the sands.

State officials agree, Snarr said, that once the bitumen is out of the sand it is cleaner than it was in the first place because the bitumen is gone, and the solvent is completely removed and recycled.

The sand returned to the mine contains 14 percent water, similar to wet sand on a beach, which speeds up the process of reclamation by helping plants "get a foothold," Snarr said.

Snarr said his company has developed a process that uses only one and a half barrels of water, including the water returned to the mining pits in

the waste sand, for each barrel of oil produced.

“We don’t have the water, why start something you can’t finish.” said John Weisheit of Living Rivers. He noted fierce competition for Green River/Colorado River water manifest in proposals to build a huge pipeline from the Green and Flaming Gorge Reservoir to transport water to the Denver area.

The problem, according to Weisheit and WRA, is that the composition of Earth Energy’s “natural” solvent is a trade secret, meaning that they are unable to analyze Snarr’s claims that the solvent is benign.

“Any Utahn who wants to build a home must go through a more rigorous permitting process than an oil company hoping to use powerful chemicals to dissolve rocks,” Weisheit said on Tuesday. “Oil companies should not get free passes from state regulators,” he added.

Earth Energy owns 213 acres and has leases on 6,000 acres, Weisheit said, insisting that the area has a “more pristine functioning ecosystem” than the national parks.

“All you get [when land is disturbed] is a dusty weed pile,” Weisheit said. “When these guys are done [Grand County] will be the big eyesore of Utah.”

Weisheit does not believe the citrus-based solvent can be benign. “It dissolves oil, can I use it to clean the engine of my old truck and dump it into the sewer?” he said.

Citrus-based solvent is used in dishwater detergent and it is used to clean off-shore oil rigs, Snarr said.

The citrus-based solvent is derived from what is left over after oranges and grapefruit are turned into juice, he said.

“It’s a very effective cleaning material,” Snarr said, noting the solvent is biodegradable, unlike refined petroleum solvents.

Snarr compared his process with throwing an orange peel on the ground. “Would you consider that harmful to the environment?” he said.

© moabtimes.com 2010