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Oil sands mining plan in Utah draws strong reaction

By Amy Joi O'Donoghue , Deseret News
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Paul Wickelson and his sons Otis, left, and Lev perform a skit as a coalition of groups against the development of tar sands meets with the press in Salt Lake City, Tuesday, June 30, 2015. (Ravell Call, Deseret News)

SALT LAKE CITY — The debate over an oil sands mining operations' impact to nearby perennial springs in eastern Utah continues to rage, a more than eight-years-long controversy that once again stoked protests and a hearing on Tuesday.

At one point, the discussion over the proposed expansion of the PR Spring Project on the border of Uintah and Grand counties inspired heated remarks from a University of Utah geologist who conducted a hydrologic study in the area that he said shows water resources are vulnerable.

"Unfortunately, every decision that has been made to date is the (same) as looking out at the sky today and saying it is impossible that water can fall from the sky, and I find that infuriating," said William Johnson. "The conclusions are based on data that was never intended to find a hydrological resource."

Johnson was referring to 180 holes that were drilled in the project area by U.S. Oil Sands to determine the existence of groundwater where the company initiated an oil sands extraction project in 2013. The holes were drilled at an exploratory depth of more than twice the level at which the company expects to mine, and no groundwater was found, said John Davis, an attorney representing the company.

"The entire record demonstrates that there will be no impact on groundwater because there is no measurable ground record on site," he said. "The springs are hydrologically disconnected."



Dr. William Johnson speaks during a public meeting in Salt Lake City, Tuesday, June 30, 2015, concerning a tar sands development in Uintah and Grand counties. (Ravell Call, Deseret News)

The Utah Division of Water Quality used that data and its own analysis to reach a conclusion that any impacts to groundwater from the mining operation were "minimal," a finding that was subsequently upheld in a ruling by the Utah Supreme Court.

Because Canada-based U.S. Oil Sands is seeking to expand the footprint of its mining operation, the Utah Division of Oil, Gas and Mining held a hearing on its plans to grant tentative approval to the proposal.



Director John Baza of the Utah Division of Oil, Gas and Mining speaks during a public meeting in Salt Lake City, Tuesday, June 30, 2015, concerning a tar sands development in Uintah and Grand counties. (Ravell Call, Deseret News)

John Baza, division director, said the proposed mining changes drew a number of protests from groups opposed to oil sands mining in Utah, including Living Rivers, the Sierra Club, Western Resource Advocates and Peaceful Uprising, a group co-founded by environmental activist Timothy DeChristopher.

"Grand County is still cleaning up the mess from the uranium mines of the 1950s," said Castle Valley Council member Tory Hill. "It is a toxic legacy that is still going on. Don't let this be another toxic legacy."

U.S. Oil Sands obtained leases to 32,005 acres from the Utah Schools and Institutional Trust Lands Administration (SITLA) and as the nation's first commercial bitumen-extraction project, predicts 190 million barrels of oil are recoverable.

The company uses a proprietary citrus-based solvent that extracts bitumen, a semi-solid oil-based substance found in oil sands, of which Utah has the most abundant reserves in the world. The in-place tar sands or oil sands resources in Utah are estimated to be at 12 billion to 19 billion barrels, according to the U.S. Department of Interior.



Rob Dubuc speaks during a public meeting in Salt Lake City, Tuesday, June 30, 2015, concerning a tar sands development in Uintah and Grand counties. (Ravell Call, Deseret News)

U.S. Oil Sands wants to expand its initial phase from 213 acres to 316 acres and while the mining area would increase, the company is proposing to dispose of the waste rock as the mining progresses, eliminating the "waste piles" left behind.

The actual mined area increases from 93 acres to 235.5 acres, while the disposal area will decrease from 70 acres to 27.5 acres.

Cuthbert said that change will allow reclamation of the land to occur more rapidly.



Wayne Western listens during a public meeting in Salt Lake City, Tuesday, June 30, 2015, concerning a tar sands development in Uintah and Grand counties. (Ravell Call, Deseret News)

"U.S. Oil Sands has been committed from the outset to develop a good project to extract bitumen with minimal impacts to the environment and will continue to do so," said Barclay Cuthbert, vice president of operations.

Groups argued that not only should the expansion be denied, but the original permit revoked altogether.

"It makes no common sense to waste the resources of clean water and the

destruction of habitat," said Miranda Pratt.

Before the hearing, a small group that included representatives from Utah Tar Sands Resistance and Peaceful Uprising held a press conference and presented a skit to voice their opposition to the mining operation.

Baza, who said he will review the information presented, will ultimately make a determination with advice from staff on whether final approval will be given to the project.

"I did not want to close down this process because I think it is valuable to hear your comments and your statements," said Baza, who let the hearing run past its allotted time. "There are things that have been said here today that have touched me and I am sensitive to those."

The mining operation remains in the construction phase, with production that could begin by the end of the



John Davis speaks during a public meeting in Salt Lake City, Tuesday, June 30, 2015.

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