

Protesters disrupt work at tar sands mine

Eric Trenbeath Moab Sun News | Posted: Thursday, August 13, 2015 9:08 am

Protesters engaged in what they called an “enforced shutdown” of operations this week at the nation's first tar sands strip mine in the remote Book Cliffs area about 70 miles north of Moab.

Members of the environmental activist group Peaceful Uprising erected two, 20-foot tall metal tripods in the PR Spring area on Monday, Aug. 10, and then suspended activists from them to blockade mine roadways and prevent the operation of heavy earth-moving equipment.

The action, according to Peaceful Uprising spokesperson Jesse Fruhwirth, came in response to a recent mine disaster in southern Colorado that sent millions of gallons of toxic, heavy metal-laden water into the Animas and San Juan rivers. The San Juan ultimately drains into Lake Powell on the Colorado River.

“A century of profit-driven resource extraction ... has left us with a legacy of toxic waste,” Fruhwirth told the Moab Sun News. “The Animas River disaster should be a reminder that our children will reap what we sow.”

The blockade by about 40 people shut down mine operations for six hours before officers from the Uintah and Grand County sheriff's departments arrived and plucked the protesters from their perches using “cherry pickers,” or boom lifts.

Four arrests were made and the detainees were transported to the Uintah County Jail in Vernal, where they were booked for trespassing – a class A misdemeanor, according to Uintah County Sheriff's Cpl. Troy Slauch.

“We appreciate and respect their right to protest,” Slauch said. “But when they trespass and interfere with someone else's right to go to work, then we have to do something.”

All of the protesters have since been released on bail, according to an Aug. 11 alert from Peaceful Uprising.

Utah Tar Sands Resistance spokesperson Raphael Cordray, who was at the scene, said that the arrests



Book Cliffs protest

A Uintah County Sheriff's employee plucks a protester from a tripod erected as a barricade on a road near the PR Spring tar sands mine in the Book Cliffs area north of Moab. [Photo courtesy of Direct Autonomous Media]

took place without incident.

“The cops were being decent,” Cordray said. “They weren't rough handling anyone like last year.”

Cordray was present in August 2014, when her group sponsored a protest that resulted in 21 arrests. Thirteen protesters chained themselves to equipment and another seven formed a blockade across the road.

Protesters accused the police of intimidation, but Uintah County Undersheriff John Laursen said at the time that it was the protesters who had gotten out of hand.

“The folks who had chained themselves to the equipment were very polite and cooperative,” Laursen said last year. “But as we were removing them, the six other protesters who tried to block the road created quite a melee. There were some fisticuffs.”

Utah Tar Sands Resistance has established a permanent protest “vigil camp” at PR Spring to provide a constant presence in the area for the purpose of monitoring and documenting the effects of tar sands strip mining and other developments in the area, Cordray said.

The mine at PR Spring is being developed by Canadian company U.S. Oil Sands. It has been dogged by protests and litigation from environmental groups since the Calgary-based company was issued permits to mine in 2012. The company recently received tentative approval from the Utah Division of Oil, Gas and Mining (UDOGM) to expand its operation.

U.S. Oil Sands CEO Cameron Todd said that he respects the rights of protesters to express their opinion, but added that public safety is his biggest concern.

“No one should advocate standing out in front of heavy equipment that can't see them,” he said.

Todd said that the protest was a relatively minor disturbance for the company, but that for workers who had to be sent home, it resulted in a loss of pay for the day.

He said that using the Animas River disaster as an impetus for the protest was just an excuse, and that if anything, it exemplified the need for modern mining techniques that his company employs.

“That (Animas) disaster is a good example of the problems associated with 100-year-old mining technology,” Todd said. “It is not what anyone in modern resource extraction should be doing.”

Todd said that by doing away with tailings ponds, and by performing ongoing reclamation – in which topsoil is removed and set aside, and then spread back over a re-countoured landscape after mining is complete – the company is following a model of sustainable mining practices.

“USO has no liquid tailings, so therefore no liquid to cause contamination,” he said. “I'm going to have

the most environmentally sustainable project that's within my control.”

State grants tentative approval for expansion; requires further water monitoring

The protest falls on the heels of a recent decision by UDOGM to allow the company to expand excavation at its test pit area from 213 to 317 acres. The company holds leases to mine up to 32,000 acres – about half the size of Arches National Park.

The agency granted “tentative approval” for the expansion, but will require U.S. Oil Sands to implement a water quality monitoring system, and to provide evidence of compliance with EPA air quality standards before the company can begin processing ore.

“We're committed to accessing our state's abundant natural resources in an environmentally responsible manner,” UDOGM Director John Baza said. “To ensure responsible mining at PR Spring, we have asked the mine operator to provide more information.”

The company filed a request with the agency to expand its operations at PR Spring last year.

The expansion was challenged by Living Rivers, a Moab-based Colorado River advocacy group, which has long maintained that the mining operation has the potential to contaminate springs in the area, and ultimately, the watershed of the Green and Colorado rivers.

Living Rivers has unsuccessfully challenged the mine in court and has charged the Utah Division of Water Quality with issuing a permit while failing to recognize the potential for sub-surface water contamination.

At an informal hearing in Salt Lake City in June, UDOGM heard concerns from Living Rivers that centered on an independent water study conducted by Dr. William Johnson, a professor at the University of Utah's Geology and Geophysics Department, that determined sub-surface water systems in the area were at risk of contamination from the mine's operation.

“This confirms what we've always known,” Living Rivers Executive Director John Weisheit said. “There is water up there, there is the danger of pollution.”

The findings of the peer-reviewed study contradict those of the Utah Division of Water Quality (DWQ), which said the mining operation posed no threat for contamination of groundwater resources.

Johnson said that the division's assertions were made in the absence of real data. The university study determined that there was a hydrological connection between the mine processing and disposal site on top of the plateau, and springs that are located lower in adjacent canyons, he said.

Johnson said the study doesn't conclude definitively that the springs will be impacted, but that given the

hydrological connection with the ridge tops, it is incorrect to assume there won't be any impact.

“This case demonstrates that the absence of data allows statements to be made that sway regulators and judges toward incorrect assumptions,” Johnson said.

Utah DWQ groundwater protection manager Dan Hall said that his agency has reviewed Johnson's study and that it stands by its decision.

“It's a little bit challenging for us,” Hall said. “The record is all there and we stand by the process.”

Hall said that Johnson's assertion that the state lacked data is untrue, and that when the company drilled test holes to identify the resource, it failed to strike water until a depth of nearly 2,000 feet.

“We went through a core process,” he said.

Todd said that he is happy with UDOGM's decision and that U.S Oil Sands is committed to environmental sustainability. He said the company will fully comply with monitoring requirements, and he is confident that the project won't adversely affect water sources.

“This is in keeping with the company's mission of being the world's most environmentally responsible resource development company in its class,” he said.

Weisheit said that he felt that UDOGM's decision was a good one and that he was pleased to see the agency “take a leadership role in protecting the water.”

But he said the real fault lies with the state legislature and its insistence on developing fossil fuels.

“Look at all the time and energy going into this,” he said. “Can you imagine if we invested this much into alternative sources?”