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## Tar sands mine project gets go-ahead from state agency

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by Lisa J. Church

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40 years ago

A Utah official last week approved plans for a tar sands mining project proposed for an area of the Book Cliffs in Uintah and Grand counties. The mine, planned by Canada-based Earth Energy Resources, would be the first commercial oil and tar sands mine in the U.S.

John Baza, director of the state Division of Oil, Gas and Mining (UDOGM), issued a decision Sept. 13 in which he found that, despite concerns raised by several environmental groups, UDOGM officials followed proper procedures and legal requirements in approving the PR Springs Mine last year.

The decision follows a July 27 informal hearing in which Baza and other UDOGM officials took comments from several environmental groups that opposed the project, including the Moab-based Living Rivers, Red Rock Forests, Peaceful Uprising and the Center for Biological Diversity.

During that hearing, the groups argued that tar sands mining in the Book Cliffs area would have long-term effects on water and air quality, and could potentially pollute creeks and rivers including the Green River, the Colorado River and Willow Creek. The groups also raised concerns about dust pollution, harmful effects to wildlife habitat, and argued that tar sands mining would be detrimental to the environment because it emits more greenhouse gas than traditional crude oil mining.

Baza wrote that after reviewing the documents and the information submitted by the involved parties, he concluded that the necessary protections are in place to allow the project to move forward. Baza also noted that Earth Energy has obtained the required permits from the state Division of Water Quality and clearance from the Environmental Protection Agency regarding air quality issues.

John Weisheit of Living Rivers said Tuesday that his group will consult with an attorney and may file an appeal to stop the state from approving the mine.

“[UDOGM is]using oil and gas guidelines for tar sands strip mining and I think this is completely, different,” Weisheit said. “It’s going to end up looking like West Virginia. I don’t really think they have clear and concise rules and regulations.”

Weisheit said Utah Gov. Gary Herbert should be concerned because oil and tar sands mining does not fall in line with the stated goals of the governor's energy task force.

"Here they are letting in something that's going to consume a lot of gas and water to produce," he said. "Is this a national sacrifice or a watershed? Anything they do is going to rip the watershed up. It's not a neighborly thing to do. For the future, it's just a bad idea."

The mine, proposed by Canada-based Earth Energy Resources, would be located on 213 acres of private lands and property owned by the state School and Institutional Trust Lands Administration.

Glen Snarr, president and chief operating officer for Earth Energy, said this week that his company will begin by constructing an open-pit tar sands mine on a 62-acre portion of the property. That mine is expected to mine 3,000 to 3,500 tons of ore daily, which will result in 2,000 barrels of bitumen – a tar-like form of petroleum – extracted from the sand. Earth Energy will open additional pits on the property if the first proves as successful as expected, Snarr said.

"The first unit is the show and tell," he said. "It will show the public that we can do what we say can be done. We'll do what we do in an environmentally friendly kind of way."

Snarr said Earth Energy is in the process of raising \$35 million to finance the project and the process to acquire a permit from Grand County is underway.

"I think it's pretty exciting for the county," Snarr said. "You've got a wonderful resource there that can lessen oil dependence for the country. It also helps improve energy security. And it's good for the counties because it can help with dependable, long-term employment."

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