

Twenty arrested at June 19 protest at PR Spring mine

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Twenty environmental activists were arrested in the East Tavaputs Plateau of the Book Cliffs after trespassing onto the U.S. Oil Sands PR Spring mine site on June 19 to protest the mining of tar sands in Utah. Acting on a plan to restore lands they contend was destroyed by the construction of the PR Spring mine, the protestors planted native seeds at an open pit during the final demonstration at the three-day “mine reclamation action.”

The protest was planned by the Tavaputs Action Council, a coalition of organizations and individuals including Utah Tar Sands Resistance, Canyon Country Rising Tide, Living Rivers, Peaceful Uprising, Wasatch Rising Tide and Elders Rising.

“We were trying to do this for ourselves, to do something positive at the mine and demonstrate the alternative world that we want to see,” said Canyon Country Rising Tide activist Sarah Stock, who helped organize the event.

According to the Grand County Sheriff’s Office, police transported 13 people to the Grand County Jail in Moab and seven were taken to Uintah County Jail in Vernal due to the limited number of Grand County vehicles present at the protest, which occurred in Grand County near the Uintah County border. The protesters were charged with criminal trespass, a class B misdemeanor.

Grand County Sheriff’s Lt. Kim Neal said that the majority of protesters were additionally charged with interfering with an arresting officer — resisting arrest — also a class B misdemeanor. When given a verbal warning to leave, most chose to stay, forming a circle, locking arms and singing, according to Neal and to Tavaputs Action Council organizer Lauren Wood. All the arrested protesters had posted bail and were released as of Monday morning, June 20.

Cameron Todd, CEO of U.S. Oil Sands, told *The Times-Independent* that the ongoing protests will not hinder the development of the tar sands mine, which he said is on track to produce oil before the end of the year. Although mine construction slowed in February when oil prices plummeted and two contractors closed their operations in Utah, U.S. Oil Sands announced the restart of full construction at the PR Spring Mine on May 31.

According to the U.S. Oil Sands announcement, construction of the PR Spring mine is 93 percent complete.

“To me [the protesters] are a distraction and not a very big one,” Todd said. “ ... I personally don’t give it a lot of attention. There’s a lot of really important problems in the world and we’re working on how to do good development, how to provide sustainable alternatives that haven’t been done before.”

U.S. Oil Sands plans to use open-pit mining and will refine tar sands bitumen at an onsite processing plant using a new proprietary extraction process. According to the U.S. Oil Sands website, the new process employs limonene, a biodegradable solvent derived from citrus. Company officials claim the process is less energy intensive than other tar sands mining techniques and does not require tailings ponds, so the footprint of the mine site is smaller than other tar sands mines.

U.S. Oil Sands, which leases 32,005 acres including the 5,930-acre site from the state School and Institutional Trust Lands Administration (SITLA), has said the leased areas contain an estimated 4.4 billion barrels of crude oil in the form of oil sands. The company estimates that the project will contribute \$240 million to the local economy over the course of 10 years.

“SITLA believes that the U.S. Oil Sands project can produce a valuable commodity in an environmentally sensitive manner,” said SITLA Associate Director John Andrews, who also serves as the agency’s chief legal counsel. “U.S. Oil Sands has filed a bond with the state that will fully guarantee long-term reclamation and re-vegetation of the site.”

However, Jennifer Spinti, a research associate professor of chemical engineering at the University of Utah and author of “A market assessment of oil shale and oil sands development scenarios in Utah’s Uinta Basin,” said it is difficult to predict the costs and benefits of bitumen extraction in Utah because oil sands mining has not yet been done in the state. Costs are also highly dependent on the price of oil, which is difficult to predict, said Spinti.

“Everyone wants to hear a number,” Spinti said, “but there is a high degree of uncertainty.”

Activists attending last weekend’s protest called tar sands in the Book Cliffs another boom and bust fossil fuel economy that will ultimately harm the environment and surrounding communities.

“All across the region people are facing a similar situation,” said Canyon Country Rising Tide activist Will Munger. “ ... We must ensure that the CEO’s don’t bail with bonuses while workers and local communities suffer. We must take the money generated by the fossil fuel industry to repair the land and water while supporting local communities’ transition away from a fossil fuel-dependent economy.”

According to officials with Canyon Country Rising Tide, more than 100 people participated in the Mine Reclamation Action, camping on public land next to the tar sands mine and attending workshops, panels, and music shows. There were art and poetry workshops, a permaculture class to prepare for the Sunday protest, a

panel by indigenous activists discussing the meaning of environmental protests on colonized land and a briefing by a law school student, explaining the arrest process and activists' rights.

“All in all, the action was quite a success,” said Wasatch Rising Tide organizer Lauren Wood. “People were focused on the work and knew they were risking arrest.”

On June 11, 10 protestors were arrested at the “fourth Intergenerational Family Campout,” an event hosted by Utah Tar Sands Resistance that took place on land leased by U.S. Oil Sands, but away from mining activities. Activists described the arrests as a “surprise,” saying that police presence at the protests has varied over the years.

Although he said U.S. Oil Sands staff did not have any interaction with any of the protests, Todd expressed concern about individuals walking onto an active mine site.

“We’re very concerned about public safety and people putting themselves and others at risk going into an active industrial site,” Todd said. “ ... It’s a bad idea and there’s no good reason for doing it, especially if all people are doing it for is to get media attention.”

Calling it “protest season,” Todd said at this time of year the company now expects to see protest activity during the summer.

“This is protest season,” Todd said. “ ... Some people bike ride, some people garden, some people do sports, and other people protest.”

Times-Independent reporter Molly Marcello contributed to this story.