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Utah regulators still OK with contentious tar-sands mine expansion, but will require water monitoring

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State regulators have upheld their tentative approval of expanded strip mining at a tar sands deposit, but with key caveats requiring operators to monitor nearby springs for potential groundwater contamination and submit documentation showing the mine is in compliance with air quality regulations.

The decision issued Friday by Utah Division of Oil, Gas and Mining director John Baza is a partial victory for environmentalists who contend the PR Spring Mine is hydrologically connected with nearby springs below in the Book Cliffs. Moab-based Living Rivers has long argued the mine would damage springs vital to ranches and wildlife — but to no avail until now.

In past decisions upheld by the Utah Supreme Court, state environmental officials have steadfastly refused to require monitoring. Now the state is showing a change of heart after hearing testimony from a University of Utah geologist two weeks ago.



Al Hartmann | The Salt Lake Tribune
A small group from Peaceful Uprising, Utah Tar Sands Resistance and concerned citizens read statements and performed a skit with children on the steps of the Utah Department of Natural Resources as a security guard records them before a crucial hearing Tuesday, June 30 at the Utah Division of Oil, Gas and Mining in Salt Lake City.

U. researcher Bill Johnson has published findings this year in a peer-reviewed journal that he says prove the PR Spring Mine would pollute neighboring springs.

“The feedback we received from concerned individuals helped us determine that these two additional amendments were necessary for the expansion to move forward. I believe the direction we’ve gone helps mitigate their concerns,” Baza said in a prepared statement. “We’re committed to accessing our state’s abundant natural resources in an environmentally responsible manner. To ensure responsible mining at PR Springs, we have asked the mine operator to provide more information.”

The mine is already approved to operate on 213 acres on the Uintah-Grand county line on Tavaputs Plateau and is only beginning mine operations. Last year, U.S. Oil Sands submitted a request to expand its mine by 104 acres. Now it has until Nov. 1 to submit monitoring plans that Living Rivers will be helping design. It is barred from processing ore until DOGM approves these plans, according to Baza’s order.

Attorneys for the Calgary-based company had argued monitoring would be a waste of time and effort since the ridge-top mine has no connection with any groundwater source and chemicals from the company’s process to separate oil from ore wouldn’t degrade any groundwater that may be present. Prior findings by the Utah Department of Environmental Quality endorse both claims.

Johnson told Baza that his research shows these two assumptions are “demonstrably incorrect.” Mine officials countered that Johnson’s findings contained “errors.”

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