

Water impact at issue with tar sands mine in eastern Utah

By BRADY McCOMBS, Associated Press
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SALT LAKE CITY (AP) — Opponents of Utah's first tar sands mine called on state officials Tuesday to withhold approvals for the project because new evidence shows water in the area will be negatively impacted.

U.S. Oil Sands, the Canadian company building the mine, pushed back against that premise at a public hearing in Salt Lake City. Attorney John Davis said the company has already proven there aren't measurable quantities of water in the area and that the mine will have minimal effect.

The hearing was scheduled after the state received dozens of opposition letters to a decision this spring to grant tentative approval for a larger footprint for the mine.

The project in eastern Utah that has become another battle point in the western tug-of-war between proponents of allowing development on open land and those who believe the wide open expanses should be preserved.

U.S. Oil Sands has invested nearly \$100 million in the project in the last decade and is expected to begin extracting oil later this year. The company's latest request asks the state to give it permission to be allowed to dig mining pits on a wider swath of land near the Book Cliffs on the border of Uintah County more than 200 miles southeast of Salt Lake City.

Tar sands mines extract oil from minerals in the earth, a process that costs more than pumping liquid oil.

John Baza, director the Utah Division of Oil, Gas and Mining, said he'll take into consideration everything he heard before making a final decision on the permit in the next 10 days.

Living Rivers, an environmental protection organization, brought University of Utah professor of geology William P. Johnson to speak about his study that concluded the mine's tailings and leftover solvent could seep into water springs in adjacent canyons.

Johnson accused regulators of being biased and relying on faulty data to make decisions. He said using data from drill holes dug by the company eight years ago should not be used to make a decision.

"To use that as the evidence of a lack of impact for hydraulic system is the same is looking out at the sky today and saying it's impossible for water to come from the sky," Johnson said. "I find that infuriating as a scientist."

Steve Alder, an attorney for the Division of Oil, Gas and Mining, said the agency is not biased and is not relying solely on the dig holes that Johnson mentioned. His agency made the recommendation to approve the permit.

Barclay Cuthbert, vice president of operations for U.S. Oil Sands, said it has gone beyond what is required to show the mine will have a minimal effect on the environment. He said opponents of development always ask the companies are absolutely sure there's no downside.

"That's an almost an infinite requirement," Cuthbert said. "To find a way to satisfy every person's concern is almost impossible."

The staunch opposition from some to the mine was on display Tuesday. Protesters held a news conference before the hearing that featured a skit starring two small children wearing horned frog hats who fought back against a bulldozer. At the end of the hearing, a parade of people spoke about their concerns with the project.

Tory Hill of Grand County said the area near the mine is like the Serengeti of the West with beaver, elk and deer. She implored regulators to forbid a foreign company from destroying the area, so future generations can hunt, fish and play.

Rob Dubuc, an attorney representing Living Rivers, asked the board to mandate future water monitoring of the area. That's something the state's hydrologist suggested, but didn't mandate, in a report.

Baza said that's one of many things he'll take under advisement.

"I don't want you to feel like my mind is made up," Baza said. "There are things that have been said here today that have touched me."