

Arizona: Uranium claims spring up along Grand Canyon rim

A rush to extract uranium on public lands pits environmentalists, who worry about the local effect, against mining companies, which point out that nuclear power wouldn't contribute to global warming.

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GRAND CANYON NATIONAL PARK, ARIZ. -- Thanks to renewed interest in nuclear power, the United States is on the verge of a uranium mining boom, and nowhere is the hurry to stake claims more pronounced than in the districts flanking the Grand Canyon's storied sandstone cliffs.

On public lands within five miles of Grand Canyon National Park, there are now more than 1,100 uranium claims, compared with just 10 in January 2003, according to data from the Department of the Interior.

In recent months, the uranium rush has spawned a clash as epic as the canyon's 18-mile chasm, with both sides claiming to be working for the good of the planet.

Environmental organizations have appealed to federal courts and Congress to halt any drilling on the grounds that mining so close to such a rare piece of the nation's patrimony could prove ruinous for the canyon's visitors and wildlife alike.

Mining companies say the raw material they seek is important to the environment, too: The uranium would feed nuclear reactors that could -- unlike coal and natural gas -- produce electricity without contributing to global warming.

And uranium is in short supply. In recent years, mines closed in Canada and West Africa, yet the United States as well as France and other European countries have announced intentions to expand nuclear power. Predictably, the price of uranium has soared -- to \$65 a pound as of last week, from \$9.70 a pound in 2002.

In the five Western states where uranium is mined in the U.S., 4,333 new claims were filed in 2004, according to the Interior Department; last year the number had swelled to 43,153.

The push to extract more uranium has caused controversy not just involving federal land but private and state land as well. In Virginia, a company's plan to operate in a never-mined deposit spurred a hearing in the Legislature. In [New Mexico](#), a Navajo activist group is challenging in federal court a license issued just over the reservation's east border.

Uranium claims are also encroaching on stretches of Western parkland such as Arches National Park, Capitol Reef National Park and Canyonlands National Park, all in [Utah](#), as well as a proposed wilderness area in [Colorado](#) called the Dolores River Canyon.

But by far the most claims staked near any national park are in the vicinity of the Grand Canyon, which draws 5 million people a year. The park is second in popularity only to the Great Smoky Mountains of North Carolina and Tennessee.

"If you can't stop mining at the Grand Canyon, where can you stop it?" asked Richard Wiles, executive director of the Environmental Working Group.

The energy-versus-environment debate is apparent within the Interior Department, which granted the mining claims through its Bureau of Land Management. Among the mining critics is Steve Martin, superintendent of the Grand Canyon park and an Interior Department employee himself. "There should be some places that you just do not mine," Martin said.

Uranium is "a special concern," he added, because it is both a toxic heavy metal and a source of radiation. He worries about uranium escaping into the local water, and about its effect on fish in the Colorado River at the bottom of the gorge, and on the bald eagles, California condors and bighorn sheep that depend on the canyon's seeps and springs. More than a third of the canyon's species would be affected if water quality suffered, he said.

Martin is not the only one uneasy about potential water contamination. Add to the list the Metropolitan Water District of Los Angeles, which sells wholesale water throughout Southern California from its Colorado River Aqueduct. "In addition to the public health impacts, exploration and mining of radioactive material near a drinking water source may impact the public's confidence in the safety and reliability of the water supply," the district's general manager, Jeffrey Kightlinger, wrote in March to Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne.

No one is mining near the Grand Canyon yet, but wooden claim stakes can be spotted throughout the brush-covered plains north and south of the park.

Vane Minerals, a British company, applied last year to start exploratory drilling on seven sites in the Kaibab National Forest, near the canyon's popular South Rim.

Under current mining law the Forest Service had no choice but to allow the drilling, Regional Forester Corbin Newman testified in March to Congress. The mission of a national forest is different from that of a national park, he pointed out. Indeed, signs at the Kaibab Forest's border proclaim that visitors are entering the "Land of Many Uses."

In response to the approval, the Grand Canyon Trust, the Center for Biological Diversity and the Sierra Club sued in federal court, alleging that the Forest Service didn't thoroughly investigate the environmental effect of drilling and prospective mining. In April, a judge issued a temporary restraining order until the case could be heard, probably in the summer.

Drilling had already begun near Deer Tank Wash just off a dirt road about five miles from the canyon park's east entrance. Now, the only signs of that activity are a 6-inch pipe sticking up half a foot from the ground near a large piñon tree, and hay scattered in the mud.

The wash is prone to flooding, said Taylor McKinnon, a public lands advocate for the Center for Biological Diversity. "Would the water from a flash flood go through the bore hole to the aquifer? We don't know because there wasn't an analysis," he said.

Meanwhile, five additional proposals for exploratory drilling have recently been submitted to the Kaibab National Forest, according to Newman. And three old uranium mines near the canyon park are on standby, ready to resume operations.

Many of the companies are based abroad, said McKinnon, so their directors don't understand the special place that the Grand Canyon holds in this country's lore: "What if an American company went to drill at Stonehenge?"

But the region is special in another way, said Kris Hefton, chief executive of Vane's American uranium operation. The uranium is found in "breccia pipes," contained geological formations that hold higher-grade deposits than elsewhere in the U.S., he said.

Breccia pipe mines can be compact, less than 20 acres in size, and uranium producers say they are among the easiest to restore after mining is done. And because the ore holds so much uranium, it's cheaper to mine. "They're not as susceptible if the price drops," Hefton said, adding that mining can be profitable in the region even if uranium fetches only \$20 a pound.

"You won't have to depend on foreign uranium," he said. Though higher-grade deposits are found in Canada, and more mines are opening in the next five years, "you never know what the Canadians will do. It just makes sense to protect our industry from a national security standpoint."

Nevertheless, Rep. Raul M. Grijalva (D-Ariz.) has introduced a bill that would withdraw a million acres of federal land around the Grand Canyon park from future mining and mineral leases. The bill would not affect the claims already staked if they are found to contain uranium deposits.

And so uranium mining could end up being part of the view at Gunsight Point, a promontory north of the park at the end of a rutted dirt road on public land. There, two striking gorges merge into one, with a dry wash at the bottom of Snake Gulch coming in from the east and Kanab Creek flowing in from the west.

Overlooking the creek are 14 uranium claims, according to an analysis of Interior Department data by the Environmental Working Group. The claims are held by companies such as Energy Metals and Uranium One Ventures, and by an official with Quaterra Resources Inc., which boasts to investors that it is "one of the largest claim holders in the Arizona Strip District."

On a hazy morning, the canyon is still visible downstream. And Martin, charged with its protection, is apprehensive. His experience with uranium mines is confined to one that actually operated right at the canyon's edge, grandfathered in because it opened before Congress created the national park in 1919. The U.S. bought the site in 1962, and mining stopped in 1969.

Now the remains of the aerial tram that carried the ore can be seen at the South Rim. Special strips have been placed atop the structure to keep California condors from resting there, to protect them from lightning strikes. And a chain-link fence keeps hikers away from mine wastes.

Elevated radiation has been detected in Horn Creek below, and signs have been posted warning visitors not to drink the water. A National Park Service sign explains to the public that uranium deposits also lie just outside the park.

"What does the future hold?" the note asks, and concludes: "Mines and other industry near parks often bring unforeseen impacts on park resources."

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