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Mining near Grand Canyon a radioactive idea

Our view: Antiquated 1872 law puts our state treasure and other parks at risk

There is no place more sacred to Arizonans than the Grand Canyon.

However, it is at risk.

A British mining company is about to begin exploratory drilling for toxic, radioactive uranium in Kaibab National Forest just outside the eco-fragile boundaries of Grand Canyon National Park.

This ill-conceived drilling is powerful evidence that tighter restrictions must be enacted to protect the Canyon. It further indicates the critical need to modernize the General Mining Act of 1872, which authorizes mining for economic minerals on federal public lands.

Vane Minerals applied to the U.S. Forest Service for permits to drill at seven sites within a few miles of the South Rim, received them and trumpeted success.

"These permits are significant for the company in that we are the first in 20 years to obtain permits from the Forest Service in this area," development director Matthew Idiens said in a news release.

The Forest Service, under federal law, essentially had no choice.

"The 1872 Mining Law specifically authorizes the taking of valuable mineral commodities from Public Lands," the service said in approving the Vane application in December. "A 'No Action' alternative is not an option that can be considered."

It's not only Vane. Due to surging global metal prices, especially uranium, mining claims within five miles of Grand Canyon National Park jumped from 815 in July 2007 to 1,130 in January, according to the Environmental Working Group, a nonprofit organization that tracks claims in the West.

If just 5 percent of the applications are granted, Dave Gowdey of the Grand Canyon Trust told us Wednesday, "the Tusayan Ranger district would be turned into an industrial site."

The pollution threat is grave.

How to contact Southern Arizona Congressional delegation

Rep. Raúl Grijalva D.C.: 1-202-225-2435; Tucson: 622-6788 Web site: www.house.gov/grijalva/

Rep. Gabrielle Giffords D.C.: 1-202-225-2542; Tucson: 881-3588 Web: <http://giffords.house.gov/>

Sen. John McCain D.C.: 1-202-224-2235; Tucson: 670-6334 Web site: <http://mccain.senate.gov>

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"This industry has a terrible record," Gowdey said. For instance, he said, the Orphan Mine at the South Rim closed in 1969 but still contaminates Horn Creek with radioactive runoff.

Uranium mining has been linked to high levels of cancer and areas of radioactivity on the Navajo Reservation. The tribe has banned it. The various mining techniques used all risk contaminating the groundwater aquifer or surface water.

The river running through all of this is, of course, the Colorado, the mother of all rivers for the West and a primary source of water for tens of millions of Americans.

Taylor McKinnon, public lands advocate for the Center for Biological Diversity, told us Wednesday that the center has written the Forest Service noting legal problems with its approval of the Vane explorations. That might prompt the service to put Vane on hold while it takes a more "rigorous" look at the Vane plans, McKinnon says.

The Coconino Board of Supervisors voted unanimously to try to block uranium mining and asked the federal government to withdraw large areas of land around the national park from mineral leasing.

Richard Mayol, communications director for The Grand Canyon Trust, said Wednesday the group is working with U.S. Rep. Rick Renzi's staff in pursuit of a law that would bar mineral exploration in lands around Grand Canyon National Park. Renzi represents Arizona District 1, which includes much of Northern Arizona. His office did not return calls by press time.

The Grand Canyon National Park is not the only national treasure at risk. There has been a flood of recent claims near Arches and Canyonlands in Utah, Death Valley and Yosemite in California and Mount St. Helens in Washington, according to the Environmental Working Group.

The Grand Canyon Trust wants the 1872 mining law revised, as does the Center for Biological Diversity. We agree that the 1872 law is antiquated and must be revised, and we have said so in this space as recently as November.

It is also imperative that Arizona's delegation in the House and Senate act — and act quickly — to protect the Grand Canyon. If it's too late to stop Vane, it's not too late to preserve our treasure from the rest.

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