

Nuclear review draws crowd, concerns

By *DUSTIN BLEIZEFFER*

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CASPER -- In anticipation of at least 14 new in-situ leach uranium proposals throughout the Intermountain West, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission conducted a public meeting to gauge how the plans might affect Wyoming and other states looking to expand uranium projects.

A public scoping meeting here Tuesday evening by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission attracted some 120 attendees.

Uranium companies hoping to conduct in-situ leach mining in Wyoming and throughout the West described the process as low-impact. The process involves a series of closely spaced wells that flush uranium material through water aquifers.

Because it is "low impact," one industry official recommended that the federal regulatory agency's "generic environmental impact statement" be the last opportunity for public input as smaller site-specific applications are processed.

Wayne Heili, vice president of mining for Ur Energy Inc. said the generic EIS ought to provide "ample public review."

Several landowners and conservation groups disagreed, however. And Rick Chancellor, administrator of Wyoming Department of Environmental Quality's Land Quality Division, complained that the Nuclear Regulatory Commission had not notified his agency of the public scoping meeting.

Chancellor said Gov. Dave Freudenthal requests that the state be given participating agency status in the commission's generic EIS.

Groundwater consumption and contamination was the main concern listed by landowners and local officials.

"I hope it's not just the mining company that's doing the monitoring. That's kind of like the fox guarding the hen house," said Mike O'Brian, who serves on Crook County's land use planning board.

Echo Klaproth said her family is familiar with in-situ uranium mining, and disagreed that it is a low-impact activity.

"Damage to our surface, to our grass, to our livelihood is extensive," Klaproth said.

The proposition of in-situ uranium mining comes as many places in Wyoming are already dealing with multiple impacts of other energy activity and drought conditions.

"Here we go again, taking more water out of the aquifer in the Powder River Basin," Klaproth said.

Industry officials urged the commission not to lump conventional mill operations with in-situ mining in the generic EIS. Marion Loomis, executive director of the Wyoming Mining Association, said there exists an outdated EIS for milling operations, but that could be updated.

Other industry representatives expressed concern that there's regulatory duplicity between the Nuclear Regulatory Commission and Wyoming DEQ.

The current generic EIS effort might not conclude until January 2009, according to the agency. Industry officials suggested the agency contract the generic EIS review work so that its staff can continue processing permits.

The Powder River Basin Resource Council and Biodiversity Conservation Alliance both requested that the commission extend the Sept. 4 deadline for public comment during the public scoping process, which is a distinct possibility.

For more information about the commission's generic EIS, go to www.nrc.gov.

Send written comments to; Chief, Rules Review and Directives Branch, Mail Stop T-6D59, U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission, Washington D.C. 20555-0001.

Or email to: nrcreprnc.gov.

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