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Questions about uranium

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Ranchers and rural residents in northeast Wyoming say they've seen the brochure on how uranium producers perform in-situ leach mining. What they don't know is how it's going to work in their neighborhood, with the soils and aquifers under their homes.

Some say they're also unsure about how reliable producers are when it comes to self-monitoring, and whether state regulators are prepared to properly oversee a pending rush on in-situ uranium mining in the state.

The Wyoming Department of Environmental Quality has fielded numerous questions in recent weeks following a recent report documenting a long history of violations at Cameco Corp.'s Smith Ranch-Highland in-situ uranium mine in Converse County.

The in-situ mining process involves a series of closely spaced wells that flush uranium material through water aquifers.

Wilma Tope ranches with her husband in northeastern Crook County. She said the failures at Cameco's Smith Ranch-Highland mine are cause for concern regarding both the industry itself and the agencies that are supposed to regulate it.

"The water testing, the reporting, everything is self-monitored. And with Smith Ranch-Highland, it didn't work very well, so we know our concerns are founded," Tope said.

Based on a high volume of interest and the potential for significant uranium activity in northeast Wyoming, DEQ officials scheduled a public meeting in Sundance. The meeting is set for 6 p.m. May 28 in the basement of the Crook County Courthouse.

"It's time to get out there and talk to people," said Don McKenzie, DEQ Land Quality Division administrator.

Tope and several other northeast Wyoming residents recently organized a group called Ranchers and Neighbors Protecting Our Water, in affiliation with the Powder River Basin Resource Council. She said Powertech Uranium Corp., and possibly other uranium producers, have acquired extensive lease acreages in northern Crook County, and test drilling is already under way.

"Our goal is to educate people about the process of in-situ mining and possibility of leaking and other dangers," Tope said.

People also want to know which water aquifers might be targeted for uranium in-situ leach mining. Based on the failures of DEQ's oversight at the Smith Ranch-Highland mine, bonding levels may need to be increased and DEQ may need to add more staff, Tope said.

"These are questions we'd like answered," she said. "We need baseline (groundwater) testing -- that way if something goes awry, we have proof of what our water quality was beforehand."

Violations

McKenzie said that despite regulatory violations at the Smith Ranch-Highland mine, DEQ can assure the public there's been no groundwater contamination from the mine. That's based largely on monitoring information provided by Cameco itself. However, DEQ has taken its own samples from the mine's monitoring wells throughout the years, according to the agency.

"There's always been monitoring," McKenzie said.

He said the biggest issue at Smith Ranch-Highland was that Cameco delayed aquifer remediation in several instances -- as long as a decade in some cases. Those aquifers were not completely abandoned and ignored, but they simply were not treated and reclaimed in a prudent amount of time, he said.

DEQ spokesman Keith Guille said the agency can collect dual samples from monitoring wells to be analyzed in separate labs. He said that has been done at Smith Ranch-Highland in the past, and remains an option for future monitoring efforts.

In light of the Smith Ranch-Highland report, DEQ said it would ask Cameco to increase its reclamation bonding to \$80 million.

Cameco spokesman Gord Struthers said the company would comply and increase its bonding to that amount, but said that Cameco is still working out the details with DEQ.

Cameco is in the process of meeting several requirements set forth in a notice of violation issued by DEQ in March, including the addition of staff to oversee remediation and monitoring activities at Smith Ranch-Highland.

"We had two good meetings with DEQ. They were both positive and constructive," Struthers said.

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