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Proposed uranium mining concerns environmentalists

By Kayla Gahagan, Journal staff

RAPID CITY -- Water quality and the health of thousands of people are at risk if companies are allowed to go ahead with plans to mine uranium in South Dakota, Wyoming and Colorado, according to speakers at a meeting of environmentalists Saturday.

Lilias Jones Jarding, from Coloradans Against Resource Destruction, Shannon Anderson with the Powder River Basin Resource Council in Wyoming, Gary Heckenliable with ACTion for the Environment in Rapid City, and Charmaine White Face with Defenders of the Black Hills in Rapid City met to discuss ways to educate the public and voice concerns about several possible uranium mining projects in the states.

The main concern in South Dakota, White Face said, is exploratory drilling being done by Canadian company Powertech Uranium Corporation, which plans to drill for uranium along the southern Black Hills. Regulations in the state make it easier to obtain permits for exploratory drilling than actual mining, White Face said, which means there is still time to stop it.

Uranium mining has been proposed in parts of Wyoming and near Fort Collins, Colo. The major body of water at risk, White Face said, is the Cheyenne River. Speakers also cited the Lakota and Fall River formations. They say the Fox Hills aquifer, the South Platte River and possibly the Denver Basin could also be contaminated.

The group said uranium mining can release highly radioactive and toxic chemicals into the ground and water, either by in situ leach methods or by open pit mining.

Conventional mining involves removing mineralized rock or ore from the ground, breaking it up and treating it to remove the minerals. In situ leaching involves leaving the ore in the ground and removing the minerals by dissolving them and pumping the solution to the surface.

"The problem isn't the uranium in the ground," Jarding said. "It's when you bring it up and it can blow around, it becomes a problem."

Research offered at the meeting also suggested that some mining also causes chemicals to leach into the ground, where they can be digested by people who use wells for drinking water.

Powertech was closed on Saturday, but their official Web site said the water in an ore zone at the mine site has a naturally high mineral content that makes it unsuitable for human use, livestock or agriculture.

"The water is not suitable at the time of mining or in the future for a source of water," the site said.

The company also said that "all water supplies surrounding a site that involves groundwater chemistry are monitored so the public can be confident that their safety is not compromised. With regular testing, the population can rest assured that their drinking water is not affected."

But White Face says there are currently 29 open-pit uranium mines that have been abandoned in southwest South Dakota, and she said that uranium mining isn't safe for anyone.

"The radioactive dust is picked up in the wind," she said. "It lands on the surface of water and crops; people breathe it in; animals eat it. It's more dangerous than people think. ... South Dakota is almost in its tenth year of drought," she said. " ... Once an aquifer is contaminated, you can't fix it."

The push to mine uranium is about money, Jones said.

"The price of uranium has gone from \$20 a pound in January of 2005, to \$135 dollars this past summer, and now, it's back down to \$80 a pound," she said.

It's at the cost of disturbing the soil and contaminating the water, Heckenliable said, noting that the South Dakota Board of Minerals and Environment made a mistake when it gave approval for the Brohm mine, which is now a superfund site.

"Now, South Dakota is paying for that mess," he said.

White Face said the representatives from each state plan to stick together and let the companies know their concerns. A second meeting was planned for later Saturday, when the group would discuss legal and legislative ways to fight uranium mining.

"This is far from over," Heckenliable said.

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