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## Wyoming governor pushes for uranium study release

**Wyoming Gov. Freudenthal pushes federal regulators for quick action on uranium mining study**

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NEW YORK (Associated Press) - With energy companies clamoring to produce more uranium, Wyoming Gov. Dave Freudenthal is urging federal regulators not to delay release of an environmental study on an increasingly popular, and controversial, method of mining the radioactive element.

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission plans meetings in Wyoming later this month to get public comment on a draft environmental study it released this summer on "in situ" uranium mining. The technique involves pumping chemicals into groundwater to free uranium from the surrounding ore so it can be pumped to the surface and refined.

Critics say the technique pollutes groundwater. But supporters say it's a clean process that's less disruptive than traditional mining methods.

The NRC has received applications and letters of intent from mining companies proposing to open 28 uranium mines around the West, nearly all of them using the in situ method. Of those, 18 would be in Wyoming.

Although the NRC originally said it intended to have its final environmental document completed by January, it now says it won't be finished until next June. Freudenthal says he wants the agency to stick to the January completion date.

"With the increased use of nuclear power across the globe and a serious reconsideration of nuclear power in this country, uranium is once again taking on the mantle of a strategic energy resource," Freudenthal wrote last week to Dale E. Klein, chairman of the NRC. "It is certainly an important one to Wyoming adding to our portfolio of energy supplier to the nation, as well as our tax base and employment rolls."

The NRC calls the study a "generic draft environmental impact statement," meaning that it addresses the mining technique in general. Proposals to develop specific in situ mines would still require more environmental review, but probably at a lower level of detail.

In an interview on Wednesday, Freudenthal said he believes domestic demand for uranium will rise in coming years as the nation grows more comfortable with using nuclear power to generate electricity. But he said the mining industry needs clear, consistent direction from regulators in order to make the investments required to develop production facilities.

And while Freudenthal said he's supportive of in situ mining efforts, he noted that his administration has also levied heavy fines against one such facility operating in the state.

"This in situ stuff needs to be closely monitored because you don't always know what's happening underground if you don't keep a firm hand on the monitoring," Freudenthal said.

Power Resources Inc., operates the Smith-Highland uranium mine north of Douglas, the state's only operational in-situ mine. The company this summer agreed to pay \$1 million to the Wyoming Department of Environmental Quality to settle a notice of violation that alleged delayed restoration of groundwater, routine spills and other problems.

The state's settlement agreement called for Cameco Resources, the parent company of Power Resources, to accelerate wellfield restoration and reclamation. The company also agreed to increase its reclamation bond from \$40.7 million to \$80 million.

Don McKenzie, administrator of the Land Quality Division of DEQ, said Wednesday that his office received

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notice from Power Resources that it also had agreed to pay another \$50,000 to settle a separate violation notice the state filed this July. That notice charged the company had failed to cap exploratory drill holes as required by its permit.

Pam Viviano lives 10 miles outside of Hulett in Crook County, an area targeted for in situ uranium development. She said she and her neighbors are concerned about the future of their water supply.

"The first thing that would come to my mind is that I would think the governor would represent public opinion," said Viviano, a member of Ranchers and Neighbors Protecting our Water, an affiliate of the Powder River Basin Resource Council. "And I'm not sure that the verdict is in on what public opinion is on all these uranium mines coming in."

Marion Loomis, executive director of the Wyoming Mining Association, said his group supports Freudenthal's request to complete the study by January.

"I think ultimately it's going to be huge for the state," Loomis said of in situ uranium mining. He said the state currently produces around 2 million pounds of uranium a year, but he expects production could again reach as high as the 12 million pounds a year the state produced around 1980.

Loomis defended the in situ process.

"This is the most benign mining that you can possibly do," he said. "There's absolutely no reason that with proper monitoring and proper production facilities that there should be any contamination of groundwater."

David McIntyre, NRC spokesman, said there were several reasons that the agency pushed back the completion date from January to June, including that the Wyoming Department of Environmental Quality wanted to participate in developing the report.

The NRC has been holding public comment meetings on the draft study around the West. It plans meetings in Wyoming on Sept. 23 in Gillette and Sept. 25 in Casper. ■

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