

Ariz. tribes unite against uranium mines

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FLAGSTAFF, Ariz. - The Hualapai Tribe has renewed a ban on uranium mining on its land near the Grand Canyon, joining other Native American tribes in opposing what they see as a threat to their environment and their culture.

The tribal ban adds to a temporary mining ban on nearly 1 million federally owned acres around the Grand Canyon. The combined actions mean uranium-bearing lands in northern Arizona open to companies hungry to resume mining are growing scarce. Much of the uranium in Arizona is in the northwest corner of the state with other deposits on the Navajo Nation and other tribal lands. The high-grade ore used in nuclear energy and for medicine is especially attractive at a time when prices for uranium have risen.

But members of northern Arizona tribes say it's not worth putting their health, water and land at risk, particularly when contamination from past uranium mining operations hasn't been fully addressed.

"Contamination emanates from mining, does not know any boundaries, and it could easily cross community after community without them ever knowing," said Robert Tohe, a member of the Navajo Nation, which banned uranium on its 27,000 square-mile reservation that spans three states in 2005. "I think that's the real danger, and that's why tribes have become unified."

Tribes have long struggled to develop their economies, so when mining companies promised jobs and a revenue stream decades ago, many Native American tribes jumped at the chance to work in the mines, particularly on the Navajo Nation and around Grants, N.M.

Thus far, mining companies have been hard-pressed to convince tribes that the health risks and environmental degradation they associate with past uranium mining would not occur with new mining operations, said David Brett, president and chief executive officer of Pacific Bay Minerals Ltd. The Vancouver, Canada, company had been in negotiations to explore for uranium on the Hualapai reservation, where tribal leaders renewed a ban this month.

"There is a perception out there that is very hard to dislodge that it poses this massive health risk," he said.

While it wasn't known how much uranium could be mined from the nearly 1 million-acre Hualapai reservation, Brett said previous work had shown there was potential.

"This is what made it so attractive; it's basically unexplored territory," he said. "It's geologically crying out to be explored."

The frustration is just as evident on the nearly 1 million-acre area around the Grand Canyon that the Interior Department in July blocked from any new mining claims for a two-year period.

Sydney Hay, president of the Arizona Mining Association, said decisions by the federal government and tribes to prohibit mining in northern Arizona means less high-paying jobs. She said it also limits the state's ability to provide low-cost energy to its citizens. She called decisions by the Hualapai, Navajo, Havasupai and Hopi tribes to ban uranium mining shortsighted.

"It's not your grandfather's mining industry anymore," she said. "There are some legacy sites that have given uranium mining a bad name, but the way to fix that is to clean up those legacy sites."