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Uranium Exploration Near Grand Canyon

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With minimal public notice and no formal environmental review, the Forest Service has approved a permit allowing a British mining company to explore for uranium just outside Grand Canyon National Park, less than three miles from a popular lookout over the canyon's southern rim.

If the exploration finds rich uranium deposits, it could lead to the first mines near the canyon since the price of uranium ore plummeted nearly two decades ago. A sharp increase in uranium prices over the past three years has led individuals to stake thousands of mining claims in the Southwest, including more than 1,000 in the Kaibab National Forest, near the Grand Canyon.

To drill exploratory wells on the claims in the Kaibab forest requires Forest Service approval. Vane Minerals, the British company, received such approval for seven sites in December.

The Forest Service granted the approvals without a full-dress environmental assessment, ruling that the canyon could be "categorically excluded" from such a review because exploration would last less than a year and might not lead to mining activity.

On Tuesday, the Board of Supervisors in Coconino County, Ariz., voted unanimously to try to block any potential uranium mines. It asked that the federal government withdraw large sections of land immediately north and south of the national park from mineral leasing.

"We have a legacy, which isn't too good, from the uranium mining in the past," said Deb Hill, chairwoman of the Coconino board.

Knowledge of the cancers suffered by former uranium workers and their families on a nearby Navajo reservation, worries about uranium-laden trucks and trains on roads and concern about contamination of the aquifers and streams in arid northern Arizona were also factors in the vote, Ms. Hill said.

The Forest Service made its decision after limited public notice to local officials, environmental groups and tribal governments. There was no public hearing.

Bill Hedden, the executive director of the Grand Canyon Trust, said the approvals were the first indications that a new generation of uranium mines might spring up on the Colorado Plateau near the canyon, an area peppered with uranium-rich geological formations called breccia pipes.

Matthew Idiens, the director of corporate development for Vane, said at least seven mines had been located not far from the park in past decades, yielding an average of 3.4 million pounds a mine. The exploratory activity his company plans, Mr. Idiens added, “is somewhat limited — taking in a truck, doing a bit of drilling, but that’s it.” The breccia pipes, he said, “cover a very small area.”

“You put a shaft next to them when you mine them,” he said, “and you take the uranium out and put everything else back in.”

“After four or five years, you reclaim it, put it back the way it was, and no one would ever know you were there,” Mr. Idiens said. “We obviously understand it’s scenic and beautiful there, and we respect that enormously.”

Barbara McCurry, the Kaibab National Forest’s spokeswoman on this issue, said her agency had little choice but to allow the drilling under the 1872 mining law that governs hard-rock mining claims. “The exploratory drilling is pretty minimal,” Ms. McCurry said, adding, “Our obligation is to make sure that any impacts are mitigated.”

The Environmental Working Group in Washington has been tracking the new wave of uranium mining claims sweeping across the Four Corners region of the Southwest and is issuing a report on the claims and their possible effects,

Dusty Horwitt, the author of the report, said the Forest Service’s actions confirmed that House-approved amendments to the 1872 law on mining activity should be approved by the Senate. Congress, Mr. Horwitt said, should give federal land managers the right to balance the desires of mining companies with other values like the protection of national parks and water supplies.

“If uranium mining operations are about to start on the edge of the Grand Canyon and federal officials say there’s nothing we can do, the time is now to reform the 1872 mining law,” Mr. Horwitt said.

Mr. Hedden, of the Grand Canyon Trust, pointed out that several Indian tribes in the Four Corners area, including the Navajo, the Hopi and the Havasupai, had voted to ban uranium mining on their land.

Ms. McCurry, of Kaibab National Forest, pointed out that, if Vane found a cluster of uranium deposits and sought a permit to mine, the decision would require a full environmental analysis and an environmental impact statement.