

Zosia Piotrowski

SPH-O 313

January 21, 2018

Trouble in the Grand Canyon

A little-known fact about the Grand Canyon is that the federally owned land around this national treasure contains rich uranium deposits. Unsurprisingly, many wish to create new mines within miles of both the North and South Rims of the canyon. Today, some uranium mines already exist and are in operation. In 1986, the uranium mine, Canyon Mine was approved and opened only six miles south of Tusayan, Arizona. When uranium prices plummeted, mining at Canyon mine halted before reaching ore. When uranium prices jumped in 2006 and 2008, so did mining claims on the federal land around the Grand Canyon. As promising nuclear power projects and safer nuclear plants triumphed in Asia and India, multitudes searched for the opportunity to mine uranium close to the Grand Canyon. In 2008, the Secretary of the Interior was pressured by the House Natural Resources Committee to “ban new mining claims on one million acres adjacent to Grand Canyon National Park” (Grand Canyon Trust, 2018). The Colorado River which runs through the Canyon is an important source of “drinking water for 26 million people” (Grand Canyon Trust, 2018) and although the resolution to ban mining companies was backed by conservationists, governors and local people, the Bush administration ignored the plea and allowed 20 new mining claims to be filed just south of the canyon.

In the ongoing call to protest these mining claims, USGS, the Havasupai Tribe, conservation groups, and governors warned about the dangers and environmental impacts of uranium mining in the area. The Havasupai Tribe, which calls the Grand Canyon home protested uranium mining so near to their lands. Backed by the Grand Canyon Trust, Sierra Club, and Center for Biological Diversity, the Havasupai protested the reopening of the Canyon Mine. To aid in protecting canyon lands from ecological damage associated with uranium mining, the National Register of Historic Places named Red Butte and the land on which the Canyon Mine resides as “Traditional Cultural Property” (Grand Canyon Trust, 2018). The reopening of Canyon Mine in 2015 was not stopped regardless of the USGS findings of “wind dispersion of uranium-rich dust evident at three sites” and “evidence of elevated but highly variable radioactivity at all mine sites” (Bills, Brown, Alpine, Otton, Van Goosen, Hinck & Tilman, 2010). Those who wish to prevent future mines near the Grand Canyon hold the view that these areas should be protected through mining bans to prevent radioactive damage and waste from infiltrating drinking water, preventing enjoyment of public lands, and damaging susceptible peoples and ecosystems. In addition to concerns of safety in the canyon and its valuable water sources, conservations aim to prevent mining on federal lands such as the forests to the north and south of the canyon.

On the opposing side of Grand Canyon conservationists, uranium miners and governmental agencies tout the benefit of uranium as a source of clean energy. The Trump administration considered lifting the ban set in place by the Obama administration in 2012 “as part of a broader effort to boost domestic energy production and promote the mining of critical

minerals in the United States” (Eperlin, 2017). The Forest Service in charge of the land in contention touts the need for domestic energy resources and supports lifting the ban on uranium mining in Arizona. Industry groups also see the huge economic capacity in uranium mining and want the ban lifted to allow for profits in cleaner energy. Even local leaders say the ban “unnecessarily prevents responsible economic activity” (Cama, 2017).

While the ban on uranium mining has been highly contested since its enforcement by the Obama administration in 2012, it was upheld by the U.S. Court of Appeals in 2017 (Eilperin, 2017). However, the Trump administration is currently seeking to end the ban and allow for new mining claims and less restriction on uranium mining in federal lands. Furthermore, the current administration retains the power to lift the ban before it is set to expire in 2032, 20 years after its application. With both sides holding strong in their arguments for and against new mines in the area, actions taken to limit uranium mining mere miles away from the Grand Canyon will remain contested. While it remains highly contested, research on the impacts to surrounding areas is stressed. With the Canyon Mine in operation after a separate ruling, the ban restricts only new mining claims and development in the million-acre area around the park.

Although I value the race for clean energy sources such as the carbon-free nuclear power which uranium mining enables, I believe the ban should not be lifted and mining in the area should remain heavily restricted at least until further environmental research proves the safety of mining radioactive material. This controversy is parallel that of the Hetch Hetchy damn in that one side touts conservation and careful stewardship of natural wonders, the other champions for economic growth and a cheaper, domestic source of fuel for clean energy. While we currently purchase most of our uranium from Canada, it would be cheaper to mine it on our own lands. Similar to the reason for the passing of Hetch Hetchy damn, the search for cheaper resources push against conservationists who deem such invasive processes as dangerous and short-sighted. The drive for cheaper sources of water and now energy threaten federal lands and National Parks both in the Hetch Hetchy case and the case for uranium mining. Greed in corporations and governments will always fight the cautioning of conservation-minded organizations. Even now, the Trump administration seeks loopholes around the mining ban. Only time will illuminate the outcome of the controversy at the Grand Canyon.

Resources:

- Bills, D.J., Brown, K. M., Alpine, A. E., Otton, J. K., Van Goosen, B. S., Hinck, J. S. & Tilman, F. D. (2010). *Breccia-Pipe Uranium Mining in Northern Arizona-Estimate of Resources and Assessment of Historical Effects*. USGS: retrieved from <https://pubs.usgs.gov/fs/2010/3050/fs2010-3050.pdf>
- Cama, T. (2017, November 1). *Trump to Reconsider Grand Canyon uranium mining ban*. The Hill: Retrieved from: <http://thehill.com/policy/energy-environment/358311-trump-admin-to-reconsider-grand-canyon-uranium-mining-ban>
- Eilperin, J. (2017, December 12). *Court upholds uranium mining ban around Grand Canyon but allows nearby mine*. The Washington Post: Retrieved from: https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/energy-environment/wp/2017/12/12/federal-appeals-court-upholds-obama-era-uranium-mining-ban-around-grand-canyon-tuesday-but-allows-nearby-mine-to-open/?utm_term=.e8b9205a565a
- Grand Canyon Trust. (2018). *Uranium Mining*. Retrieved from: <https://www.grandcanyontrust.org/uranium>