

Keeping the Grand Canyon grand

by the St. Louis Post-Dispatch

There was no such thing as a Grand Canyon National Park in 1872, when the law governing mining on federal lands was enacted. Times have changed.

Yet today, that outdated law still gives federal officials no authority to prevent mining close to America's national parks, and with global prices for metals soaring, companies have been filing a mother lode of mining claims for land within echo distance of some of the most glorious national treasures.

The number of recorded claims applying to land within five miles of the Grand Canyon exploded from just 10 in 2003 to 1,130 today. Between July and January, the number grew by 40 percent.

In December, the Forest Service granted a British company permission to drill seven exploratory wells related to possible uranium finds just outside Grand Canyon National Park. The permit to VANE Minerals was issued with little notice and no public input and notes that the 1872 law "specifically authorizes the taking of valuable mineral commodities from Public Domain Lands. A 'No Action' alternative is not an option that can be considered."

Michael Dombeck, a former director of the federal Bureau of Land Management, told a congressional committee last month that "once claimed, it is nearly impossible to prohibit mining" under current law - "no matter how serious the impacts may be."

In the case of uranium mining, the impact on land, air, water - and human beings - can be extremely serious. Last year, The Los Angeles Times detailed the long-lasting environmental effects of uranium mining on Navajo land near the Grand Canyon, including high rates of cancer and areas of radioactive contamination. Former uranium miners and workers who hauled radioactive ore suffer from higher than normal rates of cancer. Concerns about this new wave of uranium prospecting have prompted local governments near the canyon to try to block mining.

On top of that, the 1872 mining law also allows companies that dig for copper, silver and gold to avoid paying royalties for minerals extracted from public lands.

This is unconscionable.

The House of Representatives passed an updated mining bill last fall that would give the Forest Service and

Bureau of Land Management more say over where mines may be located. It also would allow the government to collect royalties when minerals are extracted.

The House bill is awaiting action in the Senate. The Environmental Working Group, an advocacy organization, says that opposition from powerful mining groups makes its prospects uncertain. Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, a Nevada Democrat, previously has opposed the bill.

Enactment of the 1872 law produced a mining boom in the area around the Grand Canyon. Although it had yet to be designated a national park at that point, it was no less grand than it is today.

One hundred and twenty-six years later, we have come to understand better the importance - and the fragility - of America's unique natural treasures. With or without Reid's support, the Senate needs to take quick action to protect the Grand Canyon and the rest of our awe-inspiring national heritage and preserve them for the generations to come.

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