

Testimony of Flagstaff (Arizona) Mayor Coral Evans

House Natural Resources Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands

Wednesday, June 5, 2019

1324 Longworth House Office Building

H.R. 1373, the Grand Canyon Centennial Act

Chairwoman Haaland, Ranking Member Young, Subcommittee members and guests, I am Coral Evans, Mayor of Flagstaff, Arizona. Thank you for allowing me to be here today to testify on an issue that is so important to my community, H.R. 1373. I ask that my entire statement be included in the record. I also want to thank our congressman, Tom O'Halleran, and Chairman Grijalva for their support and leadership on this issue.

Flagstaff is known as the gateway to the Grand Canyon. It is the largest city in northern Arizona with a growing population of over 75,000 and is the most popular launching point for those visiting Grand Canyon National Park, one of the seven natural wonders of the world.

Our city and our businesses are reliant on the nearly six million visitors who come to the Grand Canyon each year and visit and stay in our community, which is only a short 85 miles to the National Park. We welcome these visitors with some of the finest amenities, including great hotels, eclectic restaurants and some of the finest craft breweries in the United States. All of this is housed in a community surrounded by some of the most beautiful peaks in the West and land that is 7,000 feet above sea level, which is a welcome respite from the desert heat.

Grand Canyon National Park is the lifeblood of our community and economy and protecting it now and for future generations is of paramount interest. For this reason, we strongly support H.R. 1373, the Grand Canyon Centennial Act. As you know, this legislation will enact a permanent moratorium on uranium mining for approximately one million acres in and around Grand Canyon National Park.

Let me be clear: uranium mining is important to the U.S. and world economy, but uranium contamination is not. Between 1956 and 2009, it is estimated that mining companies extracted approximately 23.3 million pounds of uranium in the Grand Canyon region as a resource for nuclear power plants and weapons. Unfortunately, it's history in northern Arizona is one of degradation and waste. It is estimated that there are nearly 500 abandoned uranium mines on the Navajo Nation reservation alone and estimates of nearly 2,000 more abandoned in and around the Grand Canyon. These abandoned mines are permanently destroying water resources and land, and could have irreversible effects on the Grand Canyon watershed and land around it. We cannot allow this to happen to one of nature's most beautiful landscapes. In Arizona water is our most precious resource, it is life. We must protect this asset. The future of our communities is dependent on water and access to that water.

For this reason, Madame Chair, the City of Flagstaff has passed a resolution in support of this bill. I ask for unanimous consent that this resolution be inserted in the hearing record – https://naturalresources.house.gov/imo/media/doc/Flagstaff_2019_FinalResolution.pdf

Chairman Grijalva has, and continues to be, a champion for our community and the Grand Canyon. His commitment to this issue is well known over the years. In March 2008, Chairman Grijalva introduced his first bill to withdraw lands from mineral exploration near the Grand Canyon. Over the years, he has held several committee hearings on this subject at the Grand Canyon and pressured both Republican and Democratic administrations to withdraw these sensitive lands from exploration. Because of his continued pressure, in January 2012, then-Interior Secretary Ken Salazar ordered a 20-year moratorium on new mining claims in the approximately one million acres in and around the Grand Canyon. We applaud his determination on this critical issue. Unfortunately, however, in November 2017, the U.S. Forest Service began the process of lifting the uranium ban at the Grand Canyon.

If the ban is lifted, what are some of the potential effects on Flagstaff? First, our water supply could be permanently polluted. This is unacceptable. We already have a limited water supply and we work incredibly hard to protect these resources. The City has gone so far as to purchase the Red Gap Ranch, 40 miles east of town, to secure an additional water source to ensure that we have a 100-year water supply. In addition, we have an aggressive water recycling program and other sustainability measures to ensure that we protect our water resources. Every summer our residents are requested to limit their water use to comply with our robust water conservation enforcement program. Water is a precious commodity to the City and if we somehow poison our aquifers, we simply can't survive.

Second, lifting the uranium ban will also effect tourism. Most of Flagstaff's economy is based on tourism to the Grand Canyon and surrounding areas. For instance, we have several rafting outfits and other tour operators that conduct business out of the City. Many of these businesses and their staffs, as well as support workers for the Grand Canyon and these tourist-based industries, live and work in Flagstaff. If tourists are reluctant to visit the Grand Canyon because of potential exposure and/or opposition to uranium mining, this could negatively impact some of our businesses and economy.

Finally, the City is concerned that lifting the 20-year moratorium may lead to dangerous and harmful radioactive materials being transported through the City. Again, Flagstaff has very limited water supplies and a catastrophic accident or leak in and around Flagstaff may permanently and negatively affect the water supply that is so critical to the City's existence. We can't allow this to happen.

Madame Chair, the Administration has an obligation to clean up the hundreds, potentially thousands, of abandoned mines in the region some of which have permanently polluted aquifers that have negatively impacted many in northern Arizona including sovereign nations. Before the Administration considers lifting the ban, they need to clean up every one of the legacy mines. It is the right thing to do.

Madame Chair, it is critically important to enact H.R. 1373 to permanently protect these lands and water that are so valuable and precious to Flagstaff and surrounding communities. We are

incredibly thankful that Chairman Grijalva is championing this issue and we thank you for your leadership in holding this hearing today. I'm happy to answer any questions you or the other subcommittee members may have. Thank you for the opportunity to be here today.