

TESTIMONY
OF
SUPERVISOR LIZ ARCHULETA
COCONINO COUNTY BOARD OF SUPERVISORS
BEFORE THE
HOUSE NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS, FORESTS AND
PUBLIC LANDS

“H.R. 644, THE GRAND CANYON WATERSHEDS
PROTECTION ACT OF 2009”

JULY 21, 2009

Chairman Grijalva and members of the Subcommittee on National Parks, Forest and Public Lands, I appreciate the opportunity to provide testimony on H.R. 644, the Grand Canyon Watersheds Protection Act of 2009.

My name is Liz Archuleta and I am a Coconino County Supervisor representing District Two. I am here today representing the Coconino County Board of Supervisors. The Board of Supervisors appreciates the efforts of Chairman Grijalva and the Committee to discuss the Grand Canyon Watersheds Protection Act of 2009 and the community impacts of uranium exploration near the Grand Canyon National Park.

Coconino County is the second largest county in the nation encompassing more than 18,000 square miles. Coconino County is home to national treasures, including Oak Creek Canyon, Sunset Crater National Monument, Walnut Canyon National Monument and, most notably, the Grand Canyon National Park. These treasures include rugged terrain, canyons, beautiful peaks, natural streams and national forest land. Coconino County includes thirteen percent private land with the remaining land owned by the Federal government, Native American Tribes and the State of Arizona. Coconino County is also home to the Navajo Nation Tribe, Hopi Tribe, San Juan Southern Paiute Tribe, Havasupai Tribe and the Hualapai Tribes.

Like many other communities, we are extremely concerned about the impact of uranium mining on our natural areas, tourism and health of our citizens within Coconino County. Recognizing these concerns, the Coconino County Board of Supervisors adopted the Coconino County Comprehensive Plan on September 23, 2003. In this plan, the County discourages industrial uses, including mining, along scenic corridors or at community gateways, including the Grand Canyon National Park.

Uranium exploration has always remained a concern in Coconino County and areas within the vicinity of our beautiful landscapes, watersheds and vistas. The Coconino County Board of Supervisors is concerned about pending mining claims within Coconino County and the impact of these claims will have on our natural treasures, tourism and health of our citizens.

Mining Claims in Northern Arizona

On January 10, 2008, the Tusayan Ranger District of the Kaibab National Forest issued a decision to allow VANE Minerals, LLC, to begin drilling exploration holes for uranium. VANE Minerals, LLC, is a gold, silver and uranium exploration company that operates in the United States, Great Britain and Mexico. The decision allows VANE Minerals, LLC, to drill exploration holes for uranium at seven project sites on the Tusayan Ranger District. According to the Kaibab National Forest, the primary purpose of the project is for VANE Minerals, LLC, to locate and assess the quantity and commercial resource potential for uranium ore deposits within the Tusayan Ranger District. The location of the drill exploration sites is east of Highway 64, less than two miles from the Grand Canyon National Park within Coconino County.

Within the decision memo, the 1872 Mining Law is cited as providing the authority for the Tusayan Ranger District to approve mineral exploration and development. The 1872 Mining Law was passed by Congress and signed by President Ulysses S. Grant to protect and encourage mining and settlement in the Western territories.

According to the Kaibab National Forest, because the 1872 Mining Law authorizes the taking of valuable mineral commodities from Public Domain Lands, a “no action” alternative was not an option for the Kaibab National Forest. Therefore, the decision by the Kaibab national Forest is based on whether mitigation measures are sufficient to reduce or eliminate environmental impacts at the surface, but not on whether or not to allow the exploration activity.

More than 2,000 mining claims have been filed with the Tusayan Ranger District of the Kaibab national Forest since 2003. The majority of these claims are within ten miles of Grand Canyon National Park. It’s estimated that more than 10,000 new mining claims have also been filed on land managed by the United States Bureau of Land Management on the Arizona Strip.

In reaction to concerns raised by the VANE Minerals, LLC, decision, on February 5, 2008, the Coconino County Board of Supervisors adopted a resolution opposing uranium development in the vicinity of the portions of the Grand Canyon National Park and its watershed within Coconino County. In the resolution, the Board of Supervisors identified areas in the Tusayan Ranger District and additional claims filed on lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management in House Rock Valley. The Board of Supervisors referred to previous uranium development operations in Coconino County and the long-term effects on health and the environment.

Tribal and Environmental Concerns

Uranium development operations in Coconino County have caused considerable contamination and environmental degradation, particularly on the Navajo and Hopi

Nations. On the Navajo Nation, the long-term effects from uranium mining in the 1940s and 1950s have been devastating. On the Navajo Nation alone, five mill sites and more than 500 abandoned mines have been abandoned on tribal lands. To this date, cleanup of these sites has not occurred and there remains a concern by the United States Environmental Protection Agency regarding groundwater contamination and monitoring.

In 2005, the Navajo Nation adopted a tribal resolution, the Dine Natural Resources Protection Act of 2005, to prohibit uranium mining from the Navajo Nation and recognize devastating impacts that uranium mining has on the culture, society, environment, health and economy of the Navajo people. The resolution cited the need for compensation and remediation of uranium mines, tailing piles and waste piles associated with past uranium mining.

Water is a precious resource in the State of Arizona and particularly in northern Arizona. The Coconino County Board of Supervisors has grave concerns about the impact of uranium mining on the contamination of creeks and aquifers providing public drinking water. For example, in the Grand Canyon National Park, the Orphan Mine operated within the park until 1969. The remnants from the Orphan Mine are approximately two miles northwest of the South Rim Village, between Maricopa Point and the Powell Memorial. Mining waste from the Orphan Mine are present at the upper and lower mine areas and the area is inaccessible to visitors. The presence of radioactive materials from the mine has been blamed for the contamination of Horn Creek in the Grand Canyon National Park.

In addition, in Tuba City, decommissioned uranium mining sites were capped with clay and rock causing groundwater contamination. The decommissioned mine and

site continues to put residents of Tuba City as well as the surrounding areas at risk of contaminated drinking water.

Tourism in Northern Arizona

Coconino County is the proud host to our national treasure, the Grand Canyon National Park. Designated as a National Park in 1919, more than a million visitors travel to northern Arizona to visit the Grand Canyon National Park each year. The Grand Canyon National Park encompasses more than 1.2 million acres and contains extensive geological, paleontological, archeological and biological resources.

With the 1.2 million yearly visitors, the communities in northern Arizona are the beneficiaries of tourism revenue. The Arizona Hospitality Research and Resource Center at Northern Arizona University estimates that the total annual economic impact of all Grand Canyon National Park visitors to the north and south rim is approximately \$687 million.

The economy in northern Arizona, specifically Coconino County, is dependent on revenue generated by tourism. Individuals who travel to the Grand Canyon stay at hotels, shop and eat at restaurants within Coconino County and within the cities of Flagstaff, Williams and Page. In addition, the community outside of the Grand Canyon National Park, Tusayan, generates a significant amount of tourism revenue from visitors to the Grand Canyon.

The potential negative impact to tourism in northern Arizona from uranium mining near Grand Canyon National Park cannot be overstated. In fiscal year 2009, Coconino County alone generated almost \$12.5 million in sales tax revenue. Couple this

with state sales tax collected by the state and distributed to counties and municipalities, sales tax revenue accounts for fifty eight percent of Coconino County's general fund revenues. The loss of this revenue would have a devastating financial impact on the State of Arizona and local governments in northern Arizona.

In addition to the potential loss of tourism revenue, the Coconino County Board of Supervisors has concerns regarding the impact on public safety during transportation of uranium. In several of the proposed mining sites, the transportation of the uranium would cross sensitive water sources, habitats and natural areas within Coconino County. Currently, the Coconino County Sheriff's Department provides search and rescue services on public land within the county. The county is extremely concerned that the transportation of uranium will create increased public health and safety risks that the county will be forced to respond to.

CONCLUSION

The Coconino County Board of Supervisors supports the intent of H.R. 644, the Grand Canyon Watersheds Protection Act of 2009. As outlined in our resolution passed on February 5, 2008, the Coconino County Board of Supervisors supports the permanent withdrawal of lands in Coconino County from uranium development on the Tusayan Ranger District and House Rock Valley. We believe that the Grand Canyon Watersheds Protection Act will permanently withdraw certain lands in Coconino County from uranium development and provide the county with certainty that uranium mining will not exist within our counties' borders.

The past mistakes of the uranium mining industry will have ever-lasting effects on areas within Coconino County. Coconino County, and particularly the tribes within Coconino County, have faced significant financial and long-term health costs associated with past uranium development. Abandoned uranium mines, contaminated drinking water sources and degraded landscapes are images the Coconino County Board of Supervisors does not wish to repeat. We believe this would be a disservice to the constituents we represent.

Thank you for the opportunity to address the House Natural Resources Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Land. The Coconino County Board of Supervisors would like to extend our gratitude to Chairman Grijalva and the Committee for their continued efforts to address community impacts of proposed uranium development near Grand Canyon National Park.