

Environmentalist: Uranium mine not financially feasible

By Steve Miller

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The proposed Powertech uranium mining project northwest of Edgemont isn't financially feasible and won't provide enough protection against groundwater contamination, says Paul Robinson, an environmental critic of the project.

A local company spokesman disputed Robinson's arguments.

Robinson, billed as an environmental scientist with the Western Mining Action Network, spoke at the group's biennial conference in Rapid City on Friday.

In a news conference before his appearance, Robinson, research director of the Southwest Research and Information Center in Albuquerque, N.M., said there isn't enough demand for uranium worldwide and that the current spot price of \$43 a pound isn't enough to cover the cost of production for the uranium mine proposed in the Dewey-Burdock area, 13 miles northwest of Edgemont.

"My chief concern is that the company is marketing its program to produce uranium when there is no demand for new uranium mines or their products," Robinson told reporters. "Therefore, it is building interest around a project that has very little

likelihood of producing because the market won't support new uranium mines."

Robinson said prices have dropped back to levels that existed before a spike in prices a few years ago.

Uranium reached \$140 a pound in 2007 before dropping back to about \$47 a pound earlier this year.

Robinson said there aren't enough nuclear reactors being built to even replace the ones that are aging.

Mark Hollenbeck of Edgemont, project manager for Powertech USA, said Friday he could not divulge the dollar figure at which the proposed mine would break even financially. But last spring, Hollenbeck said the \$47 to \$49 price for uranium on the spot market was well within the range that Powertech needed to make a profit on its project.

He said that even at \$43 a pound, the price is more than six times higher than the \$7 per pound uranium brought in 2003.

"Currently, there are about 35 reactors under construction in the world, and every country in the world is looking at expanding their nuclear fleet," Hollenbeck said.

He said the United States produces only about 10 percent of the 55 million pounds of uranium it uses each year to produce

20 percent of the nation's electricity.

In any case, Hollenbeck said, the project won't proceed unless it is financially viable. Meanwhile, he said, project plans are moving forward.

Robinson also said state and federal reclamation rules are too lax for in situ uranium mines.

Like such mines in Nebraska, Wyoming and Texas, Powertech USA, a subsidiary of Canadian company Powertech Uranium Corp., plans to inject chemically treated water into wells to dissolve the uranium, then pump out the solution and collect the uranium for processing.

Opponents argue the process could damage the environment, contaminate water and threaten the health of area residents. The company says the process is safe.

Robinson said neither the Nuclear Regulatory Commission nor state regulators require in situ uranium mines to return affected groundwater to its pre-mining condition.

"The NRC does a very bad job of protecting groundwater," he said. Robinson said disturbing the uranium and the accompanying heavy metals underground could cause release of contaminants into groundwater. In Wyoming, Texas and Nebraska, regulators have

allowed the in situ uranium mines to leave contamination at higher levels than existed before the mining, Robinson said.

Hollenbeck said the groundwater at Dewey/Burdock is already highly contaminated and unfit for drinking. "The radionuclides are through the roof on this groundwater. It does not meet any kind of drinking water standard whatsoever," he said. "If there weren't all these radionuclides in there, we wouldn't be going after it."

Hollenbeck acknowledged that the water after mining won't be exactly the same as before.

"It'll be the same kind of water when we started, but it won't be the exact same water," he said. "It is nowhere close to being drinking water today."

Robinson also said there is a danger of a plume of underground contaminants spreading out from the mine area and between monitoring wells that are spaced too far apart. Such an event is called an "excursion."

"These kinds of excursions have occurred beyond the well field at the Nebraska, Wyoming and Texas operations," he said.

Hollenbeck said that in addition to monitoring wells encircling the mine area, the NRC requires all in situ uranium mines to have buffer zones outside the

monitoring wells.

"If, as these people claim, one of these excursions get out from the monitoring well ring, you have to go out and drill more wells and make sure it is controlled," he said.

Hollenbeck said that no excursion of contaminants has ever gotten outside the buffer zone of any of the NRC-regulated uranium mines.

Hollenbeck, the former mayor of Edgemont, said he and other area residents are going to make sure the environment where they live is protected.

He grazes some of his cattle on land he leases on the Dewey/Burdock mine site.

"I have a certified organic ranch," he said. "I raise grass-fed organic beef and lamb. So I have the highest standards of environmentalism for my ranch. That's why I'm involved in this project. I believe it's the safest environmental way of extracting minerals that we've come up with."

The Western Mining Action Network continues its conference through Sunday at Hotel Alex Johnson. The nonprofit organization says its mission is to foster a strong network to protect the environment by reforming mining practices.

About 160 people are attending the conference, organizers said.