

WDEQ Presents information on ISL Uranium Recovery

At the request of Crook County Land Use Planning and Zoning Commission (LUP&ZC), the Wyoming Department of Environmental Quality (WDEQ) came to Sundance to address the concerns and controversy surrounding the in situ leaching (ISL) of uranium in our county and across our state. The purpose was to put to rest the many concerns that residents have, including the concern about the inability of WDEQ to oversee and monitor the many future sites planned for our county and state. Don McKenzie, now head of Land Division of WDEQ gave a short presentation on the ISL process and mentioned the violations that had occurred at Smith-Highlands. At this time, three employees have been shuffled from their past positions to become full-time with the uranium issue. However, WDEQ could not speculate on how many more they would need to adequately address the number of permits that will need careful review and research (10 expected so far for 2009 in the State of Wyoming). Also, they were unclear on how they would obtain additional personnel if needed. What they were able to tell us was that even with more personnel, WDEQ would only be making onsite visits to these projects on a quarterly basis; therefore, placing the companies in the position of being "self-monitoring." They would also make occasional "split-sample" water tests, where they would have half of the water sample tested, the company would test the other half, and results would be compared and verified. How often, was not said. So, water testing of the outer monitor wells is still essentially in the hands of the corporations, as well as reporting of results. It was even mentioned that these companies could feasibly turn in water samples that were in fact not even from the site, as nobody could really say where they were getting them.

When the issue of bond money came up, the WDEQ said that only the area "within the mining site is covered by the bonds put aside by the uranium companies." When questioned as to the ease of obtaining the money in case something did happen, it was clear that this part of the process could be quite difficult to follow through with.

Concerns about the huge amounts of wastewater consumed by this process were glossed over with the comment that "there is only a small percent of water used in the bleed off process." Comments to clarify this small amount appeared to go unheard. Audience members tried to explain that "small percent did not equal small amounts." According to the uranium industry, the extraction wells waste 20 gallons per minute (gpm), and there are typically 10 extraction wells per acre. This amounts to over 105 million gallons of wastewater pumped from our aquifers for only 1 acre per year. Considering that WDEQ did not seem to grasp the enormity of this issue was extremely disconcerting for many in attendance. It also appeared as if they were just as unsure about the amount of water that is wasted in the reclamation process, and no clear answer for this was given.

Questions about what recourse we would have if our wells dried up due to a drop in the water tables from excessive waste water were answered by stating that "this would be an issue to take up with the state engineer's office". The statement was made that the State of Wyoming does not guarantee that any well will continue to flow: in some cases a drop of 10 feet after mining was done in the Pumpkin Buttes

area. The comment was made by an audience member that almost everyone in their area has artesian wells, and that if the flow dropped, then the wells would have to be pumped, which would require running electricity to them.

The question and answer session went on for 1+ hours, with many questions and concerns left unanswered. If anything, many people came away from the meeting with the feeling that if things do not change, we definitely would not have adequate protection by the WDEQ, and little if any recourse should these sites cause contamination or depletion of our aquifers.

This summary consists of a compilation of the views of the officers of Ranchers & Neighbors Protecting Our Water, who were in attendance at the meeting. If anyone who was there has any further comments or corrections, please feel free to email us.

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