Navajo Plans to Block Uranium Transport

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FLAGSTAFF, Arizona (AP) — A uranium mining company seeking a mineral lease on state land in Arizona could have a hard time transporting the ore off-site because of the Navajo Nation's objections to an industry that left a legacy of death and disease among tribal members.

The section of land in Coconino County is surrounded by the Navajo Nation's Big Boquillas Ranch. The tribe has said it will not grant Wate Mining Company LLC permission to drive commercial trucks filled with chunks of uranium ore across its land to be processed at a milling site in Blanding, Utah.

The Navajo Nation was the site of extensive uranium mining for weapons during the Cold War. Although most of the physical hazards, including open mine shafts, have been fixed at hundreds of sites, concerns of radiation hazards remain.

The tribe banned uranium mining on its lands in 2005, and last year passed a law governing the transport of radioactive substances over its land. The ranch itself is not part of the reservation, although the Navajo Nation owns it.

"Given the (Navajo) Nation's history with uranium mining, it is the nation's intent to deny access to the land for the purpose of prospecting for or mining of uranium," officials from the Navajo Department of Justice wrote in response to the mineral lease application.

The parcel of state land is in a checkerboard area of Arizona, east of the Hualapai reservation and south of the Havasupai reservation and Grand Canyon National Park. Tribal officials and the park superintendent have said any mining would threaten nearby water sources, though Wate Mining disputes that.

VANE Minerals spokesman Kris Hefton said mining would provide dozens of jobs in the remote area. VANE Minerals formed Wate Mining with Uranium One Exploration U.S.A. Inc.

The state parcel is reached by traveling on Interstate 40 to Seligman, then northwest on US 66 before hitting Indian Route 18. The company said it would need to construct a mile of road and improve some existing ranch roads to haul uranium ore.

Documents filed with the Arizona State Land Department indicate Wate Mining had requested approval from the Navajo Nation for the proposed access route, but the tribe said it has nothing on record showing that, nor does the state have access to the property.

"We have no intention of allowing them to cross Navajo lands unless they have

appropriate access rights," Navajo Deputy Attorney General Dana Bobroff said in an email.

Hefton declined to comment on road access and whether the Navajo Nation's stance would impede the project.

Land Department spokesman Bill Boyd said it's up to the applicant to secure whatever rights it needs to access neighboring, non-state trust lands. The parcel that Wate Mining is seeking to mine traditionally had been leased for grazing, Boyd said.

Wate Mining's proposal would have seven trucks per day hauling uranium ore from the mine site over 1.5 years. The mine would operate five days per week, extracting 70,000 tons of ore that would produce 1.1 million pounds (0.5 million kilograms) of processed uranium, or yellow cake.

Aside from a mineral lease, the company also needs permits from the Arizona Department of Environmental Quality.

"We'd like to get this started as soon as we can," Hefton said.

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