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Keeping the Grand Canyon grand

By Brad Powell

Standing on the South Rim of the Grand Canyon, gazing into the awe-inspiring abyss, it's easy to think that this timeless landscape is impervious to human activity and impact.

That would be a mistake.

We know that, for years, reckless and unbridled uranium mining has had serious impacts on the canyon's fragile ecosystem—polluting groundwater and poisoning wildlife. That is why, in 2012, the Secretary of the Interior imposed a 20-year ban on new uranium mining on public lands adjacent to the Grand Canyon.

But last week the Trump administration took a significant step toward lifting that moratorium and allowing renewed mining activity. Mining companies got their wish when the administration put uranium on a list of "critical minerals" deemed necessary for national defense and energy independence, which will grease the skids for renewed development on the edge of the Grand Canyon.

The Grand Canyon has an intricate and complicated groundwater system that feeds countless seeps and springs, which in turn flow into the Colorado River—the source of safe drinking water for 40 million people. In 2010, USGS scientists found that 15 springs and several wells in the Grand Canyon area had uranium concentrations exceeding EPA's drinking water standards.

Allowing mining activities anywhere close to these sensitive watersheds is an unacceptable risk ecologically.

Putting aside for the moment the ecological threat—what are we putting at risk economically? Every year, about 6 million visitors from around the world visit the Grand Canyon to hike, bike, fish, hunt, camp, birdwatch, horseback ride or just gawk and take pictures. These millions of visitors won't be as inclined to visit the canyon area if it becomes degraded by industrial pollution.

Grand Canyon National Park itself employs 12,000 people and contributes \$680 million annually to northern Arizona's local economies, while generating some \$160 million in state and local tax revenue.

But uranium mining contributes very little to Arizona's economy. The Canyon Mine, located near the South Rim, is expected to employ just 60 people at full operation and have a lifespan of 5-10 years. That mine, like most uranium mines, is owned by a foreign company, so the profits won't stay here, and there are zero royalties collected by the U.S. government from these mines.

The risk is too great and the reward too small. Uranium mining near the Grand Canyon just doesn't make sense.

When he first visited the Grand Canyon, in 1903, President Theodore Roosevelt immediately understood that the canyon was something monumental and worthy of preservation. "Leave it as it is," he said. "Man cannot improve on it; not a bit. The ages have been at work on it and man can only mar it. What you can do is to keep it for your children and your children's children and for all who come after you, as one of the great sights which every American, if he can travel at all, should see."

Today, Roosevelt's admonition still rings true—let's keep the canyon for our children and children's children.

Tell the Trump administration to deny uranium mining in the Grand Canyon area and prevent further ecological damage to this priceless natural resource.

Brad Powell

President, Arizona Wildlife Federation

Western Region Director, Trout Unlimited

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