

PUEBLO of ACOMA testifies about URANIUM

BEFORE THE ECONOMIC AND
RURAL DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE
AUGUST 7, 2008

Acoma, as the oldest living community in this corner of the world, has some knowledge of how to live in a sustainable manner. Living in such a manner involves continuous observations of the manner in which our Earth Mother rains down her blessings in all seasons. Human activities for the coming year are based on observations from previous seasons and years.

The Acoma way of life acknowledges and honors all natural cycles so important in an arid environment. Mt. Taylor, or *Kaweshstima*, plays a central role in replenishing Acoma lands and our river of life, the Rio San Jose. From winter snowmelt to monsoonal floods, the importance of this magnificent geologic feature to northwestern New Mexico and the region's hydrology cannot be ignored.

The Mountain keeps the Rio San Jose and related springs alive at Acoma continuously throughout the year, supplying water for thirsty agricultural lands and regional aquifers. Home to low-lying clouds, innumerable varieties of vegetation, wildlife species and spring waters, the Mountain is revered by every indigenous tribe on the southwest. All look to the Mountain for sustenance and life-giving water.

Additional studies of the regional hydrology are warranted. As New Mexico moves into the forefront of a sustainable energy future, we will discover that it is not necessary to take such unwarranted risks with the true wealth of this mountainous landscape — WATER and healthy viable populations of every species. Nor has the full extent of adverse health impacts from the previous uranium boom cycle been adequately documented.

The Statement of the Uranium Producers of New Mexico before the Legislative Finance Committee in July 2008 contemplates a nuclear renaissance in a vacuum devoid of a tarnished history, the social costs associated with "boom and bust" cycles, adverse health impacts and widespread groundwater contamination.

The Uranium industry had Dr. James Peach and Dr. Anthony V. Popp testify about employment and fiscal impacts. This analysis is somewhat fantasy driven because it ignores the production of toxic waste which must be monitored in perpetuity. The costs of waste disposal and reclamation must be factored into the "Base Case" they have presented. Both have the potential to employ a work force and will require long-term environmental monitoring and analysis. The costs, of course, will make uranium mining and milling less profitable for the industry.

Gallup appears to be alive and well without the uranium industry. In fact, Gallup's main predicament, like Albuquerque, the Navajo Nation, and every other southwestern community, is securing enough potable water to meet its growth demands. The Pueblos of Acoma and Laguna are major employers in Cibola County. The jobs provided by the tourism and the hospitality industry require access to ever-increasing water supplies, as does every other offshoot, such as hospitals, schools, and railroads. Each and every household requires access to clean water, air and safe environment.

The adequacy of the regulatory framework for uranium mining and milling should be studied when so much of New Mexico's true wealth is at stake. Does the New Mexico Environment Department have the staffing levels required to carry out the necessary background studies and to evaluate reclamation plans and financial assurances?

How many watersheds and groundwater basins has the Office of the State Engineer adjudicated? Why is the Office permitting mammoth groundwater appropriations in unadjudicated basins? Who will answer to the citizens of New Mexico when drinking water aquifers have been sacrificed for short-term profits?

Are you familiar with the Homestake legacy, the Anaconda legacy, the Ambrosia Lake legacy or the contribution of each to widespread regional groundwater contamination? Are you willing to promote a new uranium boom before these legacy issues are laid to rest?

As you are all aware, market forecasts are forward looking and do not attempt to provide a critical assessment of health or groundwater contamination risks, regulatory frameworks or the outcome of water rights adjudications. That is your job. Please do not make any recommendations without first hearing from the affected communities. We are the ones who will remain long after the "boom" has gone "bust." 

— Laura Watchempino, Haaku Water Office

Alliance of Texans for Uranium Research & Action

Texas local officials, realtors and other business people, farmers, ranchers, scientists, teachers, and conservation groups met at the Capitol on Wednesday, October 8 to announce the formation of ALTURA, the Alliance of Texans for Uranium Research and Action, and to release a study showing the history of ground water contamination by the uranium mining industry in Texas.

Responding to a resurgence of uranium mining activity in Texas, Ann Ewing, President of the Kingsville-based group, South Texas Opposes Pollution (STOP) spoke on behalf of ALTURA participants, "We have experienced the serious problems from uranium mining at Garcia Hill, and we do not want to see a new round of ground water and other environmental contamination from uranium mining occur anywhere else. The laws need to be strengthened and seriously enforced to protect the drinking water in this State."

Even before uranium mining actually begins, the uranium exploration process disturbs the aquifer, rendering surrounding drinking water wells unusable. Companies can then apply for an exemption to the Safe Drinking Water Act by making a claim that the aquifer is not a drinking water aquifer.

At the end of the process, the state agency responsible for protecting the environment, the Texas Commission on

environmental Quality (TCEQ), allows uranium mining companies to amend their clean up levels.

At its launch event at the Capitol on Wednesday, October 8, 2008, ALTURA released a study by B. K. Darling, "Report on Findings Related to the Restoration of In Situ Uranium Mines in South Texas," showing that the uranium mining industry in Texas has failed to restore water quality to baseline levels, while the TCEQ practices a pattern of routinely relaxing water quality standards by failing to enforce initial requirements and amending restoration levels.

Attorney Jim Blackburn presented the study and pointed to loopholes in the law, "The current process is piecemeal, and not adequate [for] regulation of something as serious as uranium mining. I read one application for a permit by a company wanting to mine in Goliad and it read like a PR brochure. The regulatory agencies, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the Railroad Commission, and the TCEQ must adequately enforce the Safe Drinking Water Act. They need to require scientific analysis and carefully determine before exploration whether or not the company is asking to mine in a drinking water aquifer."

The announcement of the formation of ALTURA comes on the heels of the deadline for comments to the TCEQ about uranium mining rules resulting from

laws passed in the 80th Texas State Legislature. As the 81st Texas legislative session approaches, the Railroad Commission of Texas does not appear to have progressed with its rule-making. Due to heavy influences from industry, rules at both agencies favor continued uranium mining contamination.

Pointing to a thickly contaminated water filter, Art Dohmann with the Goliad County Ground Water Conservation District and the County-appointed Uranium Research Advisory Committee discussed the stakes involved in Goliad County where the Uranium Energy Corporation has applied for a permit to mine, "Since April 2007 we have had a continuation of problems with the same wells, and additional wells have started to have problems that have never had problems before."

Pointing to an inherent conflict between the mining process and the goals of the Texas State Water Plan to assure adequate water for Texas, Dohmann stated, "*In situ* leach uranium mining and restoration withdraws large amounts of groundwater, a percentage of which is contaminated and must be disposed of in deep injection wells. One small mining area will dispose of billions of gallons of water from start to finish. Preservation of the District's drinking water is imperative. The District has a pledge which is 'to be responsible stewards



of our natural resources.' We invite others to adopt the same pledge."

Cyrus Reed with the Lone Star Chapter of the Sierra Club concluded, "For too long, we have allowed uranium miners to explore, mine, and leave behind their dirty contaminants, poisoning our share of groundwater. It's time to put a stop to uranium mining until we have one agency charged with regulating this activity, until we have true baseline testing before exploration, and no get out of jail free card through continual amendments to the restoration standards."

The study released at the press conference lists active and pending exploration and mining permits. Videos of two of the participants in the press conference, Attorney Jim Blackburn and Art Dohmann with the Goliad County Uranium Research Advisory Committee, are available online at www.uraniuminfo.org. 

For More Information
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