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Senate Subcommittee on Natural Resources  
Hearing on Senate File 1219  
Cambridge, Minnesota

Members of the Subcommittee:

Because I am unable to attend your hearing in person, I would like to submit testimony on S.F. 1219 in writing. I am very concerned about uranium activities and support that bill as a reasonable way to deal with the uranium development process.

My concern about uranium activities comes from the years I lived in Rapid City, South Dakota, on the edge of the Black Hills, which have been a uranium mining area in the past. Since 1977, the area has again been the scene of active exploration and attempts to mine. Like most people, my concern began not because I knew anything about uranium, but because I was worried about the speed with which many large companies were entering the area and announcing mining plans--and by the slowness with which the state acted to get information on the process.

Exploration and the start of mining were taking place at the same time, and before anyone knew what extent the uranium activities would reach. This is the first reason I believe that S.F. 1219 would be helpful: it would allow time for thorough consideration of the problems associated with uranium development.

I also support two specific provisions of the bill because of my experience in South Dakota. First, I support charging a fee to cover the costs of studying the impacts of uranium. I'm sure some people will consider the fee excessive, but they should contact state officials in South Dakota, who suddenly found themselves with a lot of questions, a lot of expenses, and no money to deal with them. The state, last I knew, was talking about raising the filing fees for exploration permits to help solve this problem, which Minnesota can sidestep if S.F. 1219 is passed.

Second, I particularly support the provision of S.F. 1219 that insures local input on the uranium development advisory committee. In South Dakota, the 9-member board that considered mining and exploration permits contained only one person from the half of the state west of the Missouri River, which is where uranium activity began. So the people who had a stake in the outcome of the permit process felt they had no say in that outcome, which raised a lot of bad feelings.

The entire concept of S.F. 1219 is good for another important reason. In the Black Hills, we had a history of mining companies not being responsible for their wastes, of companies circumventing the law, and of a general lack of straight dealing on the part of the companies. I will get somewhat specific for your information but, to avoid length, I ask that the Subcommittee call on me if it wants details.

S.F. 1219 would provide something very important that we did not have in the

Black Hills, and that is a baseline study of the area to be mined. The first uranium rush in the area took place in the 1950's and lasted until 1974. When the mining and milling were over, most mines were not closed up or otherwise cleaned up--they are still open and dot the area. Likewise, exploration holes were left open or just plugged with a rock or some brush.

Most dangerous, though, were milling wastes called tailings, which were left on the bank of the major river in the area, the Cheyenne River. These tailings blew and eroded into the river for many years, making the water highly radioactive. There has been a massive and expensive effort to clean up the problem, but even today's "best technology" is being questioned by scientists. Parts of every aquifer in the area contain radiation, some of it at dangerous levels. Because no baseline study was done, no one knows how much of that radiation is natural and how much was caused by uranium activities, but getting clean water has proved very expensive.

During the time I was in Rapid City, four violations of existing law received wide coverage. First, Union Carbide Corporation was convicted of beginning work on a mine in the southern Black Hills without getting the necessary state permit. In that case, no local people knew mining was to begin, but they saw the increased traffic on the road to the mine and notified the state. In a second case, another operator tried to mine before getting the necessary permits, was brought to state attention by local people, and decided not to go ahead.

The third violation also involved Union Carbide. This time, the company was found to have failed to plug exploration holes, but the state decided not to prosecute. The fourth violation that received attention involved Kerr-McGee Corporation, when a state mining inspector perjured himself. He said that he had inspected Kerr-McGee's drilling site, when he had not. The company's permit was pulled as a result.

Another thing that made people in South Dakota question uranium companies' ethics was the companies' continued attempt to convince people that uranium activity would be good for them, while evidence mounted that it was not. A rancher in the southern Black Hills lost a well because of the exploration in the area. The well eventually returned, but it was highly contaminated by a variety of toxic substances. The state opened up two old exploration holes to check the plugging procedure and found both plugs were deficient--one plug was missing, and the other hole contained high bacteria activity. And although Tennessee Valley Authority announced its plan to build a uranium mill in the area, it wouldn't tell anyone where the mill site would be, including the federal government, which had to research and permit the mill.

The more I found out about uranium activities, and the more the companies told people only part of what they were doing, the more I became concerned about the entire process. Now, I do not believe that a short-term type of development that harms the environment and human health permanently is in the best interest of an area. I also do not believe that an activity surrounded by so many questionable ethical practices on the part of its proponents and by so many unanswered questions is likely to be particularly good for an area.