

Mining issues continue to be in the forefront among concerns in western South Dakota, with a growing emphasis on the effects of mining on water. Most of the focus has been on uranium--highlighted by the Uranium Initiative in November--but growing attention is being given to effects from coal mining just over the border in Wyoming.

The Uranium Initiative, which was voted on statewide, would have given voters the final say on uranium mining and milling, nuclear waste disposal, and nuclear power plant construction. The Initiative failed 51% to 49% after the infusion of a quarter of a million dollars from 38 large corporations, compared to under \$10,000 spent by proponents of the measure. The corporations who donated to defeat the Initiative read like a "who's who" of nuclear companies and included many with an interest in South Dakota uranium, such as Gulf Oil, Union Carbide, Anaconda (ARCO), Westinghouse, Chevron (Standard Oil of California), Kerr-McGee, Western Nuclear (Phelps Dodge), and Phillips.

The narrowness of the defeat was considered a victory by those who want citizen control over local development, as it showed a high level of awareness in a population that had hardly heard of uranium two years ago. Edgemont, a notoriously pro-uranium town in the southern Black Hills, celebrated the results with a parade down Main Street. One of the parade slogans was "we're glowing because we won."

The other major event concerning mining and related issues in the last six months was the Black Hills International Survival Gathering in July. The Gathering drew about 12,000 people from 40 foreign nations, about 30 Indian nations, and every U. S. state to a ranch near Rapid City. For ten days, participants shared information and worked on the many issues threatening us all, including the nuclear chain, chemical contamination, and the corporations that promote dangerous

technologies. Also highlighted were alternative systems for education, health and energy.

The event included regional strategy sessions that built awareness and contacts, and led to plans for further events. The reports of participants have been largely positive, and include a greater awareness of mining and contamination issues in western South Dakota.

Radioactive contamination, especially of water, has received increased attention. Almost a year ago, radiation pollution was discovered by Women of All Red Nations on the Pine Ridge Reservation in southwestern South Dakota. The Reservation overlies rich uranium deposits. Although the federal government had known of the radioactive water at least since 1956, residents were not alerted. Measures are being taken to install several new wells.

There has also been radioactive contamination of the Cheyenne River by uranium mill tailings on the river's bank in Edgemont. Water problems were also discovered in Rapid Valley, a large subdivision just east of Rapid City. There, tests by the U.S. Geological Survey and Environmental Protection Agency in early 1980 revealed radiation as much as eleven times the allowable level. The public was not told until late October, when the Black Hills Alliance held a press conference. Public response was immediate and ranged from independent water tests to a public meeting to households using other water.

The Rapid Valley Water Company has promised to "take action" if the EPA's fourth test, taken in December, results in high readings. The radioactive water comes from the Lakota Formation, just below the area's uranium-bearing rock. Both Rexcon, Inc., and Gulf Minerals have been exploring in the area.

Uranium exploration has caused a variety of problems in the Black Hills. A rancher in the southern Hills lost wells near holes drilled by the Tennessee Valley Authority. One well returned, but it is highly contaminated, compared to wells on other parts of his ranch, with arsenic, iron, lead, silica, zinc, and

other substances.

Complaints by ranchers south of Rapid City, near Hermosa, led to a visit by a state inspector to check hole-plugging procedures. Two holes drilled by Rexcon were uncapped and checked in November. One contained septic or bacterial decay below the surface plug, and the other contained only a surface plug--but not the continuous sodium bentonite plug required by state law.

In a letter to the editor of the Rapid City Journal, a Hermosa rancher talked of other problems from exploration activities. The problems included unfenced mudholes that could trap livestock, scattered garbage, unattended burning in dry weather, gates left open, and trespassing. In one case, she said, a crew was only stopped from drilling on unleased land because the owner happened by. In addition, water levels have dropped in that area.

The response to these problems includes a lawsuit by the Custer County Commissioners against the State Conservation Commission, the appointed agency responsible for monitoring mining and issuing permits. The County Commissioners asked the State to schedule hearings on the Gulf Minerals and Rexcon, Inc., permits at the county seat, instead of at the state capital, which is over 200 miles away. Legally, the county has a right to a local hearing, but the Conservation Commission "threw out" the request at their November meeting. The National Forest Service is also being sued for failing to follow its own regulations and federal environmental laws by permitting Union Carbide's Craven Canyon mine.

Union Carbide has been the most vocal proponent of uranium mining in the Black Hills. Opposition by local individuals and the Black Hills Alliance has kept the company's Craven Canyon proposal in the courts for over a year and a half.

Union Carbide calls the project "exploration," so it applied for a state

exploration permit. A Conservation Commission hearing on renewal of the permit drew a crowd to hear testimony from scientific experts, a Lakota medicine man, and concerned individuals. On January 9, the Commission renewed the permit unanimously; the decision is being appealed.

In early December, Union Carbide issued a press release stating that it was closing its local office because of the drop in uranium prices. The company's public relations representative, Dudley Blancke, announced the closing during an "Appreciation Dinner" for those who helped defeat the Uranium Initiative. The dinner menu included "mixed ore" (salads), "slate slices" (roast beef and pork), "tailings" (gravy), and "yellow cake" for dessert. The announcement was hailed by some as a cessation of activity by the company. However, the office was also closed last winter, and Union Carbide says that "exploration work in the area will continue"--including in Craven Canyon.

Among the responses to the increased interest in uranium mining are several proposals for the 1981 state legislative session. Laws proposed include a one-year moratorium on uranium activities, an elected Conservation Commission, an increased mineral severance tax, higher permit fees, and the gathering of baseline data before uranium activities take place.

However, as the corporations flout current laws, and as the state has only two mining inspectors to cover nearly two dozen large corporations and a number of smaller operators, many people place little hope in legislation.

Mining in the Black Hills will also be affected by the outcome of lawsuits involving the rights of the Dakota (Sioux) Nation under the 1868 Fort Laramie Treaty. The Treaty guaranteed the area to the Dakota unless three-quarters of the adult male Indians allow a change. Such permission has never been given, and the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in June that the Hills were illegally taken by non-Indians. The case has been in the courts for sixty years, and the Oglala

Sioux have sued for return of the land, instead of the Court's money settlement.

Another issue receiving recent attention is the proposal by Energy Transportation Systems, Inc., to pipe coal mixed with water from Wyoming's mines to Arkansas and Louisiana. The endeavor would use at least 20,000 acre-feet of water a year for fifty years and would result in substantial lowering of Black Hills water tables.

The Draft Environmental Impact Statement on the project was issued in November, and hearings in mid-December drew unanimous opposition from state and local officials, citizens, and environmental groups. The Final EIS is due this summer. The Bureau of Land Management is expected to continue its support of the pipeline, even though the Draft EIS states that the current rail system could move the coal at a lower environmental cost and in a more energy efficient manner.

The general sentiment in western South Dakota is not anti-mining. Mining has been going on in the Black Hills for over 100 years, and the largest gold mine in North America is at Lead in the northern Hills. But there is growing opposition to the wasteful use of water to move coal and to the special hazards of uranium mining. Events are likely to unfold quickly if Union Carbide tries again to begin mining in the Spring.

--Lilias Jones

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