

FOREIGN INTERESTS, LOCAL URANIUM

Over the last two decades I have considered inventing a hypothetical mining proposal to illustrate the absurdities and perils of the 1872 General Mining Law. Reality makes this effort unnecessary. On September 13, 2011, Oregon Energy – wholly owned by an Australian corporation – disclosed plans to mine uranium from federal public land in Southeast Oregon. Nothing is more absurd than a foreign corporation using the public domain to produce and to export raw materials for both nuclear power and nuclear weapons – all without paying royalties to the U.S. or Oregon Treasuries.

Oregon Energy's Aurora Project is a proposed open-pit mine located on two hundred and seventy two Bureau of Land Management mining claims in Southeast Oregon. Company officials estimate that Aurora's capacity is 30% of U.S. domestic uranium production. China, South Korea, India, and Russia are the principal end markets.

Uranium ore mined from open pits is crushed at an on-site mill. The crushed ore is treated with acids (primarily sulfuric acid) and other chemicals to leach uranium from the ore. The product is a sand-like powder – uranium oxide concentrate – called yellowcake. Yellowcake is shipped in 55-gallon drums for further refining.

Yellowcake processing uses large quantities of water and produces a large waste stream. (Oregon Energy has not disclosed water and electricity sources and volumes for the project.) Generally, liquid waste from refinement of yellowcake is about twice the quantity of solid waste. Liquid waste is discharged to ponds and solid waste to piles, collectively called tailings. Tailings contain the original constituents of crushed uranium ore; processing acids and chemicals; and, heavy metals. It is currently unknown where the tailing for the Aurora proposal will be stored.

Sulfuric acid in the tailings also dissolves and leaches heavy metals – mercury, molybdenum, arsenic, lead, manganese, and cadmium – as well as uranium. (The Aurora site has already been extensively mined for mercury, which pose additional health perils; sulfuric acid easily bonds with and transports mercury to waterways.) Residual uranium elements in the tailings decay and release radon; heavy metals also continue to interact within tailings and other wastes.

For communities as diverse as Moab, Utah, and Jeffrey City, Wyoming (often called yellowcake towns), the effects of uranium mining on public services and resources; ground and surface water; and, air quality are serious and dramatic. Cleanup at the Lucky Lass uranium mine in Lake County, Oregon has spanned more than two decades; costs exceed \$30 million.

In November 2011, Newmont Mining reached a \$194 million settlement with the EPA to cleanup uranium waste at the Midnight Mine site near Spokane, Washington.

Jobs promises for rural Malheur County are Oregon Energy's calling card: 250 direct construction jobs; 150 permanent jobs; 450 indirect jobs; and, opportunities for local businesses to provide goods and services to the mine. Such economic benefits rarely materialize. Mining operations like Aurora are located in isolated communities with few skilled workers and few businesses capable of providing mining operations with specialized mining equipment, products, and services (the nearest community to Aurora has a population of 150).

Additionally, workers and families often do not relocate to the mine and when they do relocate, they rarely make long-term investments such as purchasing homes.

When families do relocate, communities must spend significant resources for infrastructure such as schools; and, when mines close, the least-skilled workers often remain behind.

Source: <http://readthedirt.org/foreign-interests-local-uranium>