

# Protect the Grand Canyon Watershed from Uranium Mining

## Executive Summary

Known as the Grand Canyon State, Arizona has been home to the Havasupai since time immemorial. The Grand Canyon is one of the most iconic natural wonders of the world. However, work remains to permanently protect the Grand Canyon and the adjacent communities and wildlife that depend on a clean and reliable watershed safe from uranium mining. The uranium industry's effort to mine uranium on federal public lands near the Grand Canyon threatens the region's booming tourism industry, which supports over 12,000 jobs and encourages the protection and preservation of the natural wonder. In 2018, the Department of the Interior, under the Trump Administration, officially listed uranium as a "critical mineral." The Department of Commerce subsequently launched an investigation into the option of imposing import quotas and domestic-purchasing requirements on U.S. uranium buyers to meet defense needs and supply the nation's electrical grid. However, uranium mining in the U.S. is not vital for economic or national security.

The U.S. can obtain the majority of the uranium it needs from existing domestic and foreign suppliers and has enough enriched uranium stockpiled to meet military needs until 2060. According to the U.S. nuclear power industry, protecting domestic uranium mining through import quotas and a "buy American" requirement would actually raise costs and force nuclear power plants to close. Given the significant environmental, cultural, and economic risks, the Grand Canyon mining ban should remain permanently, and the uranium deposits near the Grand Canyon should be left undisturbed.

## Challenge

In 2012, in response to a spike in uranium prices that triggered 10,000 new mining claims around the Grand Canyon, then-Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar placed a 20-year ban on all new mining claims on approximately 1 million acres of federal land surrounding the national park. The ban was intended to allow time for scientists to study the risks of mining uranium in this treasured landscape. Ten years in, that research remains underfunded and incomplete. The uranium industry has repeatedly challenged the Grand Canyon mining ban in court and lost. However, uranium companies and politicians leveraging public sentiment around U.S. imports from Russia, including uranium, claim mining uranium in the U.S. is an economic and national security issue.

Like many mineral resources, uranium is a boom-and-bust commodity, so its price is constantly shifting, making the economic benefit of mining unstable. Since the federal government recognized that it possessed a surplus of uranium and stopped paying bonuses to mining companies for discoveries, the price of uranium has fluctuated with supply and demand within the global uranium market. While the average price of uranium has remained low, for the most part, there was a relatively brief period in 2007 and 2008 when the cost of uranium spiked to an all-time high. This price increase caused renewed interest in uranium deposits in the Grand Canyon region. By 2009, over 10,000 mining claims had been staked on public lands adjacent to Grand Canyon National Park even though the price of uranium had again started to decline. Uranium can be mined at a higher profit elsewhere in the U.S. Despite the higher grade of uranium ore in the Grand Canyon region, these deposits are in a higher forward-cost category, meaning they are more expensive to mine than other deposits.

Concerns about uranium mining near the Grand Canyon are rooted in the poor precedent set by the mining industry regarding extraction and reclamation efforts. Past uranium-mining activities have had a serious toll across the Colorado Plateau, especially on Native American lands. Since the 1950s, the plateau has been home to at least 22 uranium mills, encompassing the majority of all uranium mining conducted in the U.S. Estimates suggest that there have been over 1,000 mines and four uranium mills on the Navajo Nation lands alone.



**+10,000**

Number of mining claims in public lands adjacent to the Grand Canyon

**1,000**

Number of mines on land belonging to the Navajo Nation

**29**

Number of water sources in the Navajo Nation exceeding safe uranium levels





Today, more than 500 of those mines have been abandoned by the mining companies that operated them and remain in need of cleanup. The Environmental Protection Agency has provided more than \$1.7 billion in enforcement agreements and settlements to clean up less than half of the remaining sites. In 2008, several U.S. and tribal government agencies identified 29 water sources with uranium levels that exceeded safe drinking water standards in the Navajo Nation.

Tribes in the vicinity of the Grand Canyon are among the most at risk. The Havasupai have timelessly cared for the lands in and around the Grand Canyon. Already burdened by a history of dispossession and displacement, the existence of the Havasupai Tribe in the Grand Canyon is a tenuous one. The Havasupai Reservation subsists entirely on one water source: Havasu Creek. The loss of this water source is not only a matter of urgency but a matter of the tribe's existence and its continued erasure over the last few decades. The existence of the Canyon Mine is not a possible threat but a guaranteed one. Since the mine's inception, previous contamination leaks have only elevated the risk to local water sources, including Havasu Creek. There is an obligation as allies and stewards who share the responsibility of caring for our public lands to speak out against the development of the Canyon Mine.

Uranium operations across the U.S. have a toxic legacy that still impacts lands, waters, and public health today. It is an expensive and timely legacy to rectify and reaffirms the responsibility to protect lands around the Grand Canyon from uranium mining.

## **Solution**

Uranium mining around the Grand Canyon does not make economic, cultural, or ecological sense. Uranium deposits are common throughout the world, and the Grand Canyon region only accounts for approximately 0.29 percent of all known U.S. reserves. Attempts to label domestic uranium mining as critical to U.S. economic and national security are misleading.

Outdoor recreation and tourism are the economic engines of the Grand Canyon region, which we must protect. They support over 12,000 jobs, contribute over \$1.2 billion annually to local economies, and generate over \$160 million in annual state and local tax revenues. Uranium mining threatens these economic drivers while possessing little capacity to support the regional economy.

## **Policy Recommendations**

- Make permanent the mining ban on the 1,006,545 acres of Federal land around the Grand Canyon that were safeguarded against mining in 2012 by the Department of the Interior.



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