



American Whitewater – Op-Ed on Secretary Salazar’s 20-Year Moratorium on Uranium Mining around the Grand Canyon

Each year, tens of thousands of people spend anywhere from a few days to several months in the Grand Canyon on guided and private trips down the Colorado River. In January 2012, Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar announced a 20-year moratorium on new uranium and other hard rock mining claims on roughly 1 million acres of land surrounding the Grand Canyon. This was a bold move, and whitewater recreationists are grateful that Secretary Salazar chose to do the right thing.

As the price for uranium has increased in recent years, so have new mining claims in the area, threatening the Grand Canyon’s Colorado River and its cherished tributaries like Havasu Creek, Kanab Creek, and the Little Colorado River. It’s certainly no small feat to protect the water quality and quantity for those who reside in the Grand Canyon year-round and the 25 million people whose drinking water comes from the Colorado. At the same time, the moratorium also protects those who, after years of planning and often a great deal of travel, are fortunate enough to have the life-changing and awe-inspiring experience of floating down the river through the Canyon. Sadly, the initial inter-agency Environmental Impact Statement that assessed the impacts of these new mining claims failed to consider the potential impacts to the health of those who make this trip – whether it’s once in a lifetime or several times a year, season after season.

While the EIS initially failed to consider kayakers, rafters and canoeists, that didn’t stop us from joining a broad coalition to speak with a strong and unified voice to say that the risks of mining these areas would result in unacceptable impacts to the recreational, cultural, environmental and aesthetic values of the Colorado River and Grand Canyon. Over 350,000 comments were submitted from around the world, and ultimately Secretary Salazar agreed saying, "A withdrawal is the right approach for this priceless American landscape...We have been entrusted to care for and protect our precious environmental and cultural resources and we have chosen a responsible path that makes sense for this and future generations."

Some opponents of the decision point to the fact that there’s already uranium in the river from erosion of natural deposits and defunct mines throughout the region, however preventing more was the right move. Increased radiation and other pollution in these streams directly impact human health. Mining also requires water, and the reduction in the amount of flow in the tributaries would have also degraded the perceptions of wildness in the Canyon. In an area already overtapped for water, even very small reductions of flow in tributaries and springs would impact the experience and ecosystems of this special place.

And while some decry the missed opportunities to create mining jobs, American Whitewater supports the efforts to support the already robust recreation economy of the Grand Canyon, where tourism generates hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue each year and creates full-time jobs for people who live in the region.

While the moratorium provides longer term, albeit temporary, protection from new mines near the Grand Canyon, the need for this kind of action in the first place highlights a larger issue. Today, we value public lands for many reasons, including the clean water and outdoor



recreation opportunities they provide. The sorely outdated 1872 mining law fails to acknowledge this reality, and allows mining companies to purchase public land for the price it would have been in 1872 (\$5 an acre or less) and then take minerals from public lands - without royalty. This system creates a rush for claims on public lands. If much-needed mining law reform took place, the need for defensive measures to withdraw lands from the law would no longer be necessary. The Grand Canyon is not alone – mining companies are filing claims near National Parks and Wilderness Areas throughout the west.

American Whitewater and Outdoor Alliance have been working towards the larger goal of mining reform for many years. As we continue this work, those who have or will enjoy the Colorado and the Grand Canyon extend a heart-felt thank you to Secretary Salazar, his staff, and the administration for acting as responsible stewards of one of America's most treasured places.
