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Uranium mining company must release survey data

KEVIN BURBACH, 4:19 p.m. CDT August 20, 2014

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — A mining company must release the results of a geological survey that opponents of its proposed uranium mine in western South Dakota say is necessary to ensure that local aquifers are protected, a federal licensing board of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission ruled Wednesday.

The Atomic Safety and Licensing Board continued its hearings Wednesday morning in Rapid City, where three federal judges are hearing challenges to a license granted to Powertech Uranium Corp. for its proposed Dewey-Burdock uranium mine.

The intervenors to the proposed mine — members of the Oglala Sioux Tribe and other concerned parties — had been pushing for data Powertech collected by drilling throughout the region to find concentrations of uranium ore, among other things. They've said enough data haven't been studied to know if the region's aquifers would be contaminated or depleted if the company were to mine.

Powertech plans to use a method known as in-situ uranium recovery, which would pump groundwater fortified with oxygen and carbon dioxide into the underground ore deposits to dissolve the uranium. The water would be pumped back to the surface, where the uranium would be extracted and sold to nuclear power plants.

Dr. Robert Moran, who testified at the request of the intervenors, said making the data available would allow the geologists to better understand how the region's groundwater could be affected if the company starts mining in the area.

Powertech attorney Christopher Pugsley said his clients didn't release the data because they don't think it's relevant to the licensing process or that it will show the information opponents hope it will. He said releasing information with a confidentiality agreement to the intervenors wouldn't change the license process going forward.

The public will not have access to the information.

Testimony from intervenors and expert witnesses was to continue Wednesday and Thursday on other contentions regarding the license, including whether enough has been done to ensure that groundwater wouldn't be contaminated. Both the NRC and Powertech say the license was approved after the NRC determined that the region's groundwater was not threatened.