

Fort Collins reps seek to strengthen uranium mining rules

BY BOBBY MAGILL • BobbyMagill@coloradoan.com • August 1, 2010
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Two Fort Collins legislators have petitioned the state to strengthen proposed rules governing in situ leach uranium mining — the method Powertech Uranium Corp. plans to use at the Centennial Project northeast of the city —to prevent groundwater contamination.

In situ leaching is a method of uranium extraction that dissolves uranium ore with a fluid and pumps the solution out of the ground to be processed.

State Rep. Randy Fischer wrote a letter also signed by Rep. John Kefalas and Rep. Liane “Buffie” McFadyen urging state mining officials to ensure mining companies can’t slip through a loophole in new rules being written to govern in situ uranium mining statewide.

The Colorado Division of Reclamation, Mining and Safety is in the process of finalizing the rules, which implement a 2008 law requiring mining companies to comply with strict environmental regulations if they plan to use in situ leaching.

The rules will directly determine if and how Powertech will be able to proceed with its plans to mine for uranium in Weld County less than 10 miles northeast of Fort Collins.

Uranium mining companies, including Powertech, will be required to test the groundwater before they begin mining to determine baseline ground water quality so they can learn the level of purity to which they will be required return the ground water when they shutter the mine site.

But Fischer said many people living near potential uranium mine sites are worried that uranium prospectors could search for uranium intending to mine using conventional methods but decide later to mine using the in situ leaching process. Conventional prospecting could be done without regard for ground water quality, throwing off baseline water quality tests.

Fischer also wrote that uranium prospecting standards and safeguards need to be strengthened.

“In Weld County, citizens have expressed concerns to me (that) oftentimes drillers are out there without supervision, and there’s no way to know if they’re isolating aquifers to ensure there’s no cross-contamination,” Fischer said Thursday.

Kefalas said he has heard of incidents of uranium prospectors’ bore holes not being properly capped in Weld County.

“We just want to make sure that the public safety is protected even during the prospecting phase,” he said.

The state, Fischer said, should supervise those uranium prospecting activities to make sure groundwater isn’t polluted.