

Fort Collins Coloradoan

Mine OK sends message to Powertech

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The first new uranium mill in more than 25 years in the United States is a step closer to construction in western Colorado after state health officials licensed the mill Wednesday.

A similar permit must be issued to Powertech Uranium Corp. for its Centennial Project in situ leach uranium mine proposed for a site in Weld County, northeast of Fort Collins.

Critics of the project said Thursday the Western Slope mill approval says little about how the state might approach its review of the Centennial Project.

The Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment on Wednesday issued Energy Fuels Resources Corp. a radioactive materials license for the proposed Pinon Ridge Mill in the Paradox Valley of western Montrose County.

The mill, supported by many Naturita-area residents because of the jobs it would create and opposed by environmentalists, would process 500 tons of uranium ore each day. The ore would be extracted from conventional uranium mines around the region.

"Energy Fuels has demonstrated it can build and operate the mill in a manner that is protective of both human health and environment," CDPHE Radiation Program Manager Steve Tarlton said in a statement. "Our comprehensive review considered short- and long-term impacts of the proposed mill, including radiological and non-radiological impacts to water, air and wildlife, as well as economic, social and transportation-related impacts."

Powertech's uranium mining and processing method would be different than the conventional hard-rock uranium mining and milling that may occur in Montrose County.

At the Centennial Project, Powertech proposes to use a baking soda-like solution to dissolve the uranium underground, pump it to the surface and process it on site.

"It's up to us to lay out a responsible and clear guideline of what we're going to be doing there so the agency can review it and determine a positive result," Powertech USA President Richard Clement said Thursday. "The companies who understand the resources know there are clear guidelines they have to follow to get permits and licenses. As long as you follow those guidelines, then you will be successful."

Clement said those who understand Colorado's uranium development potential will be enthused by the state's approval of the Pinon Ridge Mill.

Environmentalists said the approval doesn't mean the state won't scrutinize the Centennial Project carefully before permitting it.

"I think it's fair to say that the state is not opposed to uranium mining, so they're going to make judgments on a case-by-case basis," said Matt Garrington of Environment Colorado.

He said the state's approval of the mill might signal to other uranium mining companies that Colorado's door is open for uranium extraction.

Jay Davis, who lives next to the Centennial Project site and is a member of mine opposition group Coloradoans Against Resource Destruction, or CARD, said he isn't sure what the state's approval of Pinon Ridge might mean for the Centennial Project.

"It's curious where they went with that and how they went with it," given the local opposition to the mill, he said.

Meanwhile, CARD fired another salvo against the Centennial Project on Thursday when it filed an appeal to a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency permit allowing Powertech to drill a test injection well at the mine site.

In December, the EPA gave Powertech a permit to conduct a "pump test," which would let the company study the hydrological properties of an underlying aquifer.

CARD is alleging the EPA failed to ask for additional data from Powertech about previous pump tests before the permit was issued.

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