

Fort Collins Coloradoan

Students test civility during uranium debate

BY BOBBY MAGILL • BobbyMagill@coloradoan.com • January 22, 2011

Is public debate a little too uncivil nowadays to talk about divisive issues without yelling like TV talking heads?

Lincoln Middle School students Friday patted themselves on the back for proving that debates don't have to be conducted the way it's done on TV.

Students hosted a low-decibel debate at CSU focused on the virtues and vices of Powertech Uranium Corp.'s plans to mine uranium and produce yellowcake at the Centennial Project site northeast of Fort Collins.

"When I came here, I thought it was a bad idea," said eighth-grader Brenden Kelley, who discussed uranium mining with CSU radiological health sciences professor Thomas Johnson. "But when we talked to the professor, he brought up good points. It could be a good idea."

Johnson was among more than a dozen experts and community members who discussed and debated uranium mining with teacher Sarah Bayer's eighth-grade science students in the Lory Student Center ballroom Friday morning.

Preston Middle School students also participated.

The discussion was part of an annual "conversation café," during which students debate a controversial local issue after months of study.

To help students learn more about the issue, Powertech invited them to the Centennial Project site last fall to conduct water testing. Students also visited a nearby ranch owned by mine opponent Jay Davis and heard presentations from experts on both sides of the issue.

Kelley said he's undecided about the Centennial Project, but he said he learned a lot about the issue from hearing what Johnson had to say.

Students at a nearby table generally supported the proposed mine, with three supporting it, two opposing it and one undecided.

The table's expert was Doug Adair, maintenance manager at the Rawhide Power Station, who urged students to look closely at hard data before deciding whether to support traditional or alternative energy sources.

"Don't get emotional," he said, urging students to be skeptical about hybrid cars and wind farms. "Show me the real science."

Emphasizing that he doesn't speak for his employer, the Platte River Power Authority, Adair told the students nuclear power - in its infancy in the United States - has great potential, and renewable energy is more of an emotional issue for its advocates than real solutions.

When it comes to uranium mining, "we have to make a choice," said Connor Fritz, the lone undecided student at the table.

Greenhouse gas emissions from traditional energy sources can't easily be contained, but Northern Colorado residents don't want their water polluted by uranium mining for low-emissions nuclear power either, he said.

"It was clear (students are) developing their critical thinking skills," said Western Mining Action Project attorney Jeff Parsons, another expert for the students.

A project such as Centennial with clear risks and benefits doesn't make for easy analysis for students, and it "pushes kids' limits," he said.

Powertech Centennial Project Manager Terry Walsh, who also served as an expert, called the conversation cafe a "brilliant debate."

"I have a good feeling about the education system," he said. "I was encouraged to see critical thinking on behalf of the students."