

Salazar's Priorities

A case study in green limits on job creation.

These columns have described the plight of Keystone XL, a proposed oil pipeline that could become an artery carrying Canadian oil to refineries in the Gulf of Mexico, as well as a source of thousands of U.S. jobs—if the Obama Administration didn't have to fend off the President's environmentalist supporters. Now comes word of a similar saga in Arizona over uranium, in which Administration officials seem to be disregarding their own staff scientists' conclusions.

At issue are uranium-mining rights in about one million acres of federal land bordering Grand Canyon National Park. The U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) estimates that the area contains some 375 million pounds of high-grade uranium ore. That's the energy equivalent of 13 billion barrels of oil—the amount of recoverable oil in Alaska's Prudhoe Bay, the largest oil field in North America.

An independent industry report found that producing the entire uranium endowment of these lands would have a total economic impact of \$29.4 billion over the project's 42-year duration. The boon would be welcome in a sparsely populated area of Arizona where skilled jobs are scarce. The USGS says the land has "the potential of becoming the second most important uranium-producing region in the United States."

But the Department of Interior needs to give its blessing before mining can go forward. In response to concerns raised by environmental groups, Interior Secretary Ken Salazar announced in July 2009 that he was considering withdrawing the land from mineral entry for 20 years. New mining claims were put on hold for two years while Mr. Salazar's staff studied the issue.

And studied, and studied. After months of consultation with federal, tribal and local authorities, thousands of comments, and dozens of public meetings, the Interior Department's Bureau of Land Management (BLM) issued its verdict this February, in a draft environmental impact statement of more than 1,000 pages. The conclusion? Mining would do little irreparable harm.

That didn't sway Mr. Salazar, who announced in June that he intended to go ahead with the 20-year withdrawal. "Cautious development with strong oversight could help us answer critical questions about water quality and environmental impacts of uranium mining in the area," he said. The BLM's final impact statement is due by the end of October, after which Mr. Salazar will issue his final decision.

The Interior Secretary's doggedness would almost be admirable if it didn't fly so clearly against his own staff's environmental analysis. Mr. Salazar cited "water quality concerns raised by downstream water users" in his June announcement. Ensuring a safe water supply should be a primary consideration; the Colorado River provides drinking water for one in 12 Americans and feeds some 15% of the nation's crops. But the draft impact statement finds "none to negligible" effect on ground- and surface water from uranium mining.

Mr. Salazar is disregarding the law as much as the science. Some 10% of the lands being considered for withdrawal were set aside in a 1984 agreement between government and industry for "multiple use," which includes uranium mining. That agreement has ensured that northern Arizona's abundant mineral resources are put to economic use without endangering the Grand Canyon or residents' livelihoods. Mr. Salazar threatens to cast it aside.

For decades the U.S. political system has tried to balance the interests of the environment against the need for economic growth and jobs. The Arizona fiasco is one more example of how the Obama Administration has tilted that balance at the cost of jobs.