Voices From the Earth

Acoma, as the oldest living community in this corner of the world, has some knowledge of how to live in a sustainable manner. Living in such a manner involves continuous observations of the manner in which our Earth Mother rains down her blessings in all seasons. Human activities for the coming year are based on observations from previous seasons and years.

The Acoma way of life acknowledges and honors all natural cycles so important in an arid environment. Mt. Taylor, or Kaweekuhma, plays a central role in replenishing Acoma lands and our river of life, the Rio San Jose. From winter snowmelt to monsoonal floods, the importance of this magnificent geologic feature to southwestern New Mexico and the region’s hydrology cannot be ignored.

The Mountain keeps the Rio San Jose and related springs alive at Acoma continuously throughout the year, supplying water for thirsty agricultural lands and regional aquifers. Home to low-lying clouds, numerous varieties of vegetation, wildlife species and spring waters, the Mountain is revered by every indigenous tribe on the southwest. All look to the Mountain for sustenance and life-giving water.

Additional studies of the regional hydrology are warranted. As New Mexico moves into the forefront of a sustainable energy future, we will discover that it is necessary to take such unwarranted risks with the true wealth of this mountainous landscape — WATER and healthy viable populations of every species. Nor has the full extent of adverse health impacts from the previous uranium boom cycle been adequately documented.

The Statement of the Uranium Producers of New Mexico before the Legislative Finance Committee in July 2008 contemplates a nuclear renaissance in a vacuum devoid of a tarnished history, the social costs associated with “boom and bust” cycles, adverse health impacts and widespread groundwater contamination.

The Uranium industry had Dr. James Peach and Dr. Anthony Popp testify about employment and fiscal impacts. This analysis is somewhat fantasy driven because it ignores the production of toxic waste which must be monitored in perpetuity. The costs of waste disposal and reclamation must be factored into the “Base Case” they have presented. Both have the potential to employ a work force and will require long-term environmental monitoring and analysis. The costs, of course, would make uranium mining and milling less profitable for the industry.

Gallup appears to be alive and well without the uranium industry. In fact, Gallup’s main predicament, like Albuquerque, the Navajo Nation, and every other southwestern community, is securing enough potable water to meet its growth demands. The Pueblos of Acoma and Laguna failed to restore water quality to baseline levels, while the TCEQ practices a pattern of routinely relaxing water quality standards by failing to enforce initial requirements and amending restoration levels.

Responding to a resurgence of uranium mining activity in Texas, Ann Ewing, President of the Kingsville-based group, South Texas Opposes Pollution (STOP) spoke on behalf of ALTURA participants, “We have experienced the serious problems from uranium mining at Garcia Hill and we do not want to see a new round of groundwater and other environmental contamination from uranium mining occurring anywhere else. The laws need to be strengthened and seriously enforced to protect the drinking water in this State.”

Even before uranium mining actually begins, the uranium exploration process disturbs the aquifer, rendering surrounding drinking water wells unusable. Companies can then apply for an exemption to the Safe Drinking Water Act by making a claim that the aquifer is not a drinking water aquifer.

At the end of the process, the state agency responsible for protecting the environment, the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ), allows uranium mining companies to amend their clean up levels. At its launch event at the Capitol on Wednesday, October 8, 2008, ALTURA released a study by B. K. Darling, “Report on Findings Related to the Restoration of In Situ Uranium Mines in South Texas,” showing that the uranium mining industry in Texas has failed to restore water quality to baseline levels, while the TCEQ practices a pattern of routinely relaxing water quality standards by failing to enforce initial requirements and amending restoration levels.

Attorney Jim Blackburn presented the study and pointed to loopholes in the law, “The current process is arcane and not adequate [for] regulation of something as serious as uranium mining. I read one application for a permit by a company wanting to mine in Goliad and it read like a PR brochure. The regulatory agencies, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the Railroad Commission, and the TCEQ must adequately enforce the Safe Drinking Water Act. They need to require scientific analysis and carefully determine before exploration whether or not the company is asking to mine in a drinking water aquifer.”

The announcement of the formation of ALTURA comes on the heels of the deadline for comments to the TCEQ about uranium mining rules resulting from laws passed in the 80th Texas State Legislature. As the 81st Texas legislative session approaches, the Railroad Commission of Texas does not appear to have progressed with its rule-making. Due to heavy influences from industry, rules at both agencies favor continued uranium mining contamination.

Pointing to a thickly contaminated water filter, Art Dohmann with the Goliad County Ground Water Conservation District and the County-appointed Uranium Research Advisory Committee discussed the stakes involved in Goliad County where the Uranium Energy Corporation has applied for a permit to mine, “Since April 2007 we have had a continuation of problems with the same wells, and additional wells have started to have problems that have never had problems before.”

Pointing to an inherent conflict between the mining process and the goals of the Texas State Water Plan to assure adequate water for Texas, Dohmann stated, “In situ leach uranium mining and restoration withdraws large amounts of groundwater, a percentage of which is contaminated and must be disposed of in deep injection wells. Some small mining area will dispose of billions of gallons of water from start to finish. Preservation of the District’s drinking water is imperative. The District has a pledge which is ‘to be responsible stewards of our natural resources.’ We invite others to adopt the same pledge.”

Cyrus Reed with the Lone Star Chapter of the Sierra Club concluded, “For too long, we have allowed uranium miners to explore, mine, and leave behind their dirty contaminants, poisoning our share of groundwater. It’s time to put a stop to uranium mining until we have one agency charged with regulating this activity, until we have true baseline testing before exploration, and now get out of jail free card through continual amendments to the restoration standards.”

The study released at the press conference lists active and pending exploration and mining permits. Videos of two of the participants in the press conference, Attorney Jim Blackburn and Art Dohmann with the Goliad County Uranium Research Advisory Committee, are available online at www.uraniuminfo.org.

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