

Uranium mill worth close look

A proposed mill in western Colorado would supply nuclear power plants, which will be key in fighting global warming.

By The Denver Post

Posted: 10/28/2009 01:00:00 AM MDT

Plans to build the first conventional uranium mill in Colorado since the Cold War will face steep challenges. After all, conversations about uranium and yellowcake often devolve into horror stories.

But if today's engineers can overcome the environmental mistakes of the past, uranium can play a key role in helping fight man's contribution to global climate change.

We support building more nuclear power plants in the U.S. since they can produce enormous amounts of electricity without emitting greenhouse gases.

Yet we import 85 percent of the nuclear fuel needed for our existing reactors — even though a rich supply exists right here at home. It's hypocritical to expect that we can build an energy future that includes nuclear power but doesn't include mining for uranium here. And while we can't control how uranium mills and mines are regulated in foreign countries, we certainly can do so with domestic producers.

A Canadian company has picked a location near the little towns of Nucla and Naturita in western Colorado for a new mill. Town leaders have approved the request, with residential support, despite the fact those communities remember the toxic tailings and cancer-stricken workers that were a part of the legacy of the earlier Atomic Age, according to The Post's Bruce Finley.

An old mill near Naturita supplied uranium for the Manhattan Project and waste and tailings remain under federal management in the area. But the area needs jobs, and the uranium that naturally occurs there can provide them.

Current plans, which would have to be approved by the Colorado Department of Health and Environment, call for a mill that would process an average of 500 tons of uranium ore daily.

The proposed Piñon Ridge mill would employ 85 people and generate another 200 mining jobs in the region. Salaries would range from \$45,000 to \$90,000 a year.

The company, Energy Fuels, says it would dispose of waste in pits and lined ponds covered with nets to keep birds away. The mill would operate under close regulation.

"You're not trusting a corporation. You're trusting regulators," Mike Thompson, a board member of the Western Small Miners Association, told Finley. "Now, if the corporation's out of compliance for an instant, regulators will shut it down."

Nevertheless, there are serious environmental concerns. The mill and local mining would disrupt big game and the Gunnison sage grouse. Environmentalists oppose the mill, and the Colorado Division of Wildlife has raised concerns.

We share those concerns, but acknowledge there are always environmental impacts when it comes to producing energy — even with renewables like solar and wind farms.

State regulators must review the plans and contingencies carefully.

If Energy Fuels can prove sound methods and practices for handling the waste materials, the state ought to approve the mill.