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A Battle Over Uranium Bodes Ill for U.S. Debate



Matthew Staver for The New York Times

Craig Pirazzi, an opponent of plans for the mill in Colorado, said, "Our health, our air, our water is going to be affected by it."

By [KIRK JOHNSON](#)

Published: December 26, 2010

NATURITA, Colo. — The future of nuclear power in America is back on the table, with all its vast implications, as [global warming](#) revives the search for energy sources that produce less greenhouse gas.

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But in this depressed corner of western Colorado — one of the first places in the world that uranium, [nuclear](#)

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Matthew Staver for The New York Times
Reminders of the perils of uranium are evident in Colorado.

[energy](#)'s primary fuel, was ever dug from the ground in industrial scale — the debate is both simpler and more complicated. A proposal for a new mill to process uranium ore, which would lead to the opening of long-shuttered mines in Colorado and Utah, has brought global and local concerns into collision — jobs, health, class-consciousness and historical memory among them — in ways that suggest, if the pattern here holds, a bitter national debate to come.

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Telluride, the rich ski town an hour away by car and a universe apart in terms of money and clout, has emerged as a main base of opposition to the proposed mill, called Piñon Ridge, which would be the first new uranium-processing facility in the United States in more than 25 years if it is approved by Colorado [regulators](#) next month.

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wisdom of the mill, but about whether uranium, laid down here in tufts of volcanic ash more than 100 million years ago, was a blessing or a curse. Minerals found in association with uranium, especially vanadium, which is used in hardening steel, sparked the first real rush in the 1930s; uranium for bombs and energy then followed in a stuttering pattern of boom and bust into the 1980s, when the nation's nuclear energy program mostly went into mothballs.

To residents here like Michelle Mathews, the fact that many opponents of the mill hail from Telluride is a crucial strike against their arguments.

“People from Telluride don't have any business around here,” said Ms. Mathews, 31, who works as a school janitor and ardently supports the idea of bringing back uranium jobs. “Not everyone wants to drive to Telluride to clean hotel rooms.”

Here in Naturita and the cluster of tiny communities in and around the Paradox Valley, where the mill could be built (cumulative population about 2,000), people disagree not just about the

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Opponents say that the nostalgia many residents here cherish about the boom years is the product of willful forgetfulness about the well-documented cancer deaths and environmental destruction the uranium mines produced. They also say that the mill company is cynically exploiting the idea of a return to simpler times.

“They say it’s going to be different this time around,” said Craig Pirazzi, a carpenter who moved to the Naturita area from Telluride a few years ago and is now a member of the Paradox Valley Sustainability Association, which opposes the mill. “But our opposition to this proposal is based on the performance of historic uranium mining, because that’s all we have to go on — and that record is not good.”

Supporters, meanwhile, say that the opponents of Piñon Ridge are guilty of promulgating ignorant fears about something they do not understand.

Even the question of who has a right to speak up has become a point of contention. Is the mill purely a local concern in a sparsely populated area, or a broader regional issue that would affect people much farther away, through, say, radioactive dust particles that might be thrown aloft?

“They’re saying not in my backyard — now how big is their backyard?” said George Glasier, a local rancher and investor who founded Energy Fuels, the company proposing the mill, and is now a stockholder and consultant. Energy Fuels is a publicly traded company based in Canada; a United States subsidiary would operate the mill.

A study commissioned by [Sheep Mountain Alliance](#), the main opposition group, of which Mr. Pirazzi is also a member, concludes that the backyard for Piñon Ridge would in fact be huge — far bigger than proponents suggest. The now-closed uranium mines that would supply the \$175 million mill, company officials have said, extend out 100 miles or so, which means that delivery trucks would travel on narrow country roads, stirring up dust that the study said could end up in the snowpack and water supply all over the region.

“In one aspect we’re being nimby’s by saying we will be affected by the negative aspects of this,” Mr. Pirazzi said. “But that is a valid concern — our health, our air, our water is going to be affected by it, and we have every right to protect our property values and our health.”

A key underlying dynamic of the discussion is that this area has often been out of sync with the national economy.

When much of the rest of the nation was suffering in [the Great Depression](#) in the 1930s, for example, miners and their families here prospered as the military bought vanadium.

Another boom came in the 1950s, during the cold war, in uranium for bombs. The economy surged again in the 1970s as the energy crisis renewed enthusiasm for nuclear

power — a period that ended in tears with reactor disasters at [Three Mile Island](#) in Pennsylvania in 1979 and [Chernobyl](#) in Ukraine in 1986.

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