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The Grand Canyon Uranium Rush

In July 2009, Interior Secretary Ken Salazar imposed a two-year halt to uranium exploration and mining on one million acres around the Grand Canyon. The moratorium was a much-needed timeout to a rush of prospecting claims near the canyon, most of them by Canadian and British companies. The rush was fueled by two things: an increase in uranium prices and the wide-open exploitation allowed on public lands by the harmful, antiquated 1872 mining law.

The Interior Department has now prepared four possible alternatives for how to proceed. The public has another 30 days to comment. The only sensible alternative is the most sweeping one: withdrawing one million acres around the Grand Canyon from mining and prospecting for the next 20 years.

Restricting mining in this area would have little effect on America's uranium supply, a vast majority of which comes from Wyoming and New Mexico.

Setting that land off-limits would protect the delicate ecosystem in and around the Grand Canyon. It would also eliminate the risk of radioactive materials, disturbed by mining, leaching into the aquifer and the Colorado River. That would affect the Havasupai Indians, who live in the canyon itself, and 27 million people who draw water from the river in Nevada and California.

The prospecting free-for-all that followed the rise in uranium prices is yet another reminder of why the country needs to reform the mining law of 1872. That law allows free access to stake mining claims on public land and gives mineral extraction priority over other uses. This perhaps made sense in 1872, but in 2011 it is simply irresponsible, especially because, under the law, mining companies are obliged to pay no royalties to federal, state or local governments.

Congress has talked for years about reforming this law only to have the effort blocked by Western senators. The majority leader, Harry Reid of Nevada, has long been the leading opponent. Real reform would include strict environmental regulation and real royalties — at

least the 5 percent royalty called for in the president's new budget. That would be best for the environment and for America's taxpayers.