

The New York Times Reprints

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit www.nytreprints.com for samples and additional information. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)



December 26, 2010

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

By KIRK JOHNSON

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.

But in this depressed corner of western Colorado — one of the first places in the world that uranium, [nuclear 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.

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.

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 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.

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.

The crash after that was utter and profound, as plans for reactor plants all over the country were canceled. Mines and mills across the West, seeing demand for nuclear fuel dry up, closed down as well. Today only one uranium mill in the United States is fully operational, in Blanding, Utah.

Bust times, in turn, put the local economy even more in thrall to Telluride, which began building out as a ski town in the 1980s.

“There were probably 300 men going to Telluride to do carpentry,” said David Helkey, 50, a mechanic who commuted to Telluride for years.

Postrecession, Telluride’s construction-driven second-home market is not what it was either, and for many residents, that has made the mill and the idea of reopened mines all the more attractive.

“Our economy just totally tanked,” Mr. Helkey said.

Other residents here are fatalistic. Hazards or no, they say, uranium is the hand that geology dealt this area. Most supporters of the mill also say they believe officials from Energy Fuels who say that tighter regulation would make everything different.

“It’s safer now,” said Sherri Ross, who works the front desk at the Ray Motel in Naturita, and spent her early childhood in Uravan, a mill town about 15 miles from here that was so contaminated with radiation by the 1980s, when the mill closed, that the whole town was razed and mostly entombed. Ms. Ross, 51, said her father died of cancer that she attributes partly to radioactive dust exposure — and also to his smoking — but wholeheartedly supports uranium’s return.

The roughly 300 new jobs that Energy Fuels officials project, mostly in reopened mines, would give the region an economic lease on life, she said.

Other veterans of uranium’s past are wary, by dint of experience.

Reed Hayes, 73, said he is still haunted by the night in July 1967, when he was working at a mill in Moab, Utah, and fell off a catwalk into a caustic vat of refined uranium pellets, called yellowcake, and acid. He quit a month later, but has suffered ever since, he said, with rashes on various parts of his body, including sometimes even inside his mouth.

“We were told that the uranium would never hurt us,” said Mr. Hayes, who has struggled for years to get compensation. “But I’ve learned a whole lot about it — that it’s hurt a lot of people and killed a lot of people.”

And it also changed every community it touched. Moab was once prime peach-growing country, for example — about 40,000 trees, including 2,000 owned by Mr. Hayes’s father, graced the town.

It all went in the early 1950s as the orchards were chopped down to house uranium workers.

Gesturing to the three stately peach trees growing behind his house in the Paradox Valley, Mr. Hayes said, "We raised Elbertas. That's what I have here, too."