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Uranium Mill in Colorado Gets License

By KIRK JOHNSON

DENVER — Colorado regulators on Wednesday approved a license for the first new rock-crushing uranium mill to be built in the United States in more than 25 years to make fuel for nuclear power plants.

The plan still has many hurdles to overcome, including transportation and air emissions permits, and opponents said they would keep up their fight as well.

But the approval of a license to handle radioactive materials is still a big step forward for a plan to bring back a storied, deeply controversial industry that boomed across many corners of the West before crashing in the 1980s.

The $175 million mill, called Piñon Ridge, would be built in an isolated rural valley in western Colorado near the Utah border — an area pockmarked with closed-down uranium mines, some of which, mill company officials said, would reopen to supply uranium ore, creating perhaps 300 jobs in an economically depressed area.

Local residents have largely supported the plan, by a Canadian company, Energy Fuels, despite a well-documented history of health effects and radioactive pollution issues that plagued the industry in the past.

Improved safety rules and regulation would make this uranium wave different and safer, supporters and company officials said.

Hilary White, executive director of a leading opposition group, the Sheep Mountain Alliance, called the decision by the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment to approve the license “rushed.” She said the group was reviewing the hundreds of pages of supporting documents that the state also released Wednesday before deciding what to do next.