

Montrose county mill can help provide safe, reliable nuclear fuel

Energy Fuels Resources, Inc. of Nucla and Lakewood, recently submitted an application to the state of Colorado to build the first new uranium mill in the United States in 25 years. Energy Fuels' Piñon Ridge Mill will be located in a remote section of southwestern Colorado, about 12 miles west of Naturita. In addition to the significant local and state benefits of the mill, there are numerous nationwide economic and security benefits to increased domestic uranium production.

We are in the midst of a global nuclear renaissance. According to the Nuclear Energy Institute, 56 nuclear reactors are currently under construction worldwide.

Asia is leading the way, with 19 in China, six in India, and six in South Korea. The U.S. currently has 104 operating reactors, and construction recently restarted on a reactor near Spring City, Tenn. These 104 reactors provide about 20 percent of our domestic electric supply.

The U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission has license applications for 28 new reactors in this country. And, according to the World Nuclear Association, 54 new nuclear reactors are in the planning stages in China alone. Many more are under consideration in other countries.

Nuclear is receiving renewed interest for several reasons. World energy demand is expected to rise significantly in the coming decades (33 percent by 2030, according to the Energy Information Administration). Nuclear technology has a long track-record of safely, inexpensively and reliably producing significant quantities of base-load electricity. And nuclear, along with hydro-electric, generates base-load electricity that is essentially carbon-free.

Unfortunately, the United States is being left behind. Uranium is the primary fuel for nuclear reactors. Despite significant domestic reserves, the United States is far more dependent on foreign sources of uranium than we are on foreign sources of oil. We have only one operating uranium mill in America (in Blanding, Utah).

Disturbingly, America is highly dependent on uranium imported from Russia. Under an agreement from 1993, former Soviet nuclear warheads are "down-blended" for use as fuel rods in nuclear reactors in America. This has been a highly successful disarmament program. However, the agreement will expire in 2013, and Russian-American relations are tense. It is likely America will need to find other sources of uranium for our existing and planned nuclear plants. Competition will be stiff, as countries like China are seeking to dramatically expand their nuclear-generating capacity, and they are actively securing sources of uranium around the world.

These facts lead to obvious conclusions for our energy future. Increasing world demand for uranium will lead to tight global supplies and significantly higher uranium prices in the coming years. We will no longer be able to rely on existing uranium sources for our nation's current nuclear plants — let alone supply the 28 reactors in the licensing process. New domestic sources of

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uranium must be developed.

Uranium is a commonly occurring mineral in the Earth's crust. Trace amounts of naturally occurring

uranium are found in soil, groundwater, seawater, and even human tissue. The most concentrated domestic reserves of uranium are in Utah, Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona and Wyoming. The Piñon Ridge Mill will be in the middle of an area rich with uranium. In fact, the mill will be constructed immediately adjacent to several historic mines and an open-pit uranium mine that is currently on stand-by.

The health and environmental impacts of past uranium mining operations are well known. As with all industrial activities, there were few regulations and minimal safeguards for uranium workers in the 1940s and 1950s. However, uranium production has changed substantially since the days when most of those problems occurred. For instance, the Mine Safety and Health Administration was created just 32 years ago, in 1978. The first environmental law wasn't enacted until 1969. As we don't judge the safety of today's automobiles by the Model T, we shouldn't judge today's modern, safe and environmentally responsible uranium industry by what happened at the beginning of the atomic age.

In the 21st century, uranium is produced safely and responsibly in the United States, Canada and Australia, the countries with the largest known uranium reserves. It is one of the most highly regulated industries in America. Today's modern mining practices, technology, laws, regulations, and financial assurance requirements work together to ensure the past is not repeated.

It is important to remember there is no energy silver bullet. The Northwest Mining Association supports renewable energy sources, in addition to more coal and nuclear power plants. However, minerals for the construction of solar cells, wind turbines and transmission lines must be mined and milled. Because of their intermittent nature, wind and solar are supplemental sources of energy, because they work only when the sun shines or the wind blows. Therefore, they operate at only 20 percent to 30 percent of capacity. Renewables also require a much larger land footprint to produce the equivalent energy generated at a traditional coal, natural gas or nuclear power plant.

Despite the calls of a few anti-nuclear activists, there is a strong national consensus growing in America for nuclear energy. Elected officials — on both sides of the aisle — support nuclear power. It is safe, reliable, and affordable.

Energy independence requires minerals — minerals we have in abundance in this country. Colorado's approval of the Piñon Ridge Mill will be a great step toward energy independence. It is time for America to join the "nuclear renaissance."

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