

Powertech, CARD debate in Nunn

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By Steven Olson

The Wellington

The debate was fairly civil. But questions that followed each side's 20-minute presentation evoked frustration.

Powertech, the Canadian-based company that wants to use in-situ leaching to mine uranium deposits between Nunn and Wellington (Colorado), and Coloradoans Against Resource Destruction, the citizen group that wants to stop the mining, squared off in a debate at the Nunn Community Center the evening of July 8.

The debate, said CARD attorney Jeff Parsons, represented a clash between "short-term benefits and long-term costs."

The crowd was split, with both sides garnering applause for their points from time to time, although CARD got most of it. Many of approximately 200 attending the debate did not like the prepared questions presented to the panel, however. They wanted questions from the audience, and it didn't take them long to express their displeasure.

Four questions in, while using slides to talk about uranium, Steve Brown, a health physicist who said he was not a Powertech employee, heard a remark that he termed a "catcall."

A little later, an unidentified man in the audience said, "If they had enough time to prepare slides, I don't know where the questions came from. I want to hear questions from the room."

Another person agreed, saying he was "missing dinner" to come to the debate so he could ask questions about the project only to find it was a "waste of time." When told the public had asked the prepared questions, he remarked icily, "Which public?"

A third answered by saying the questions had been put together by Nunn Mayor Jeff Pigue, who said he has not made up his mind about the mining proposal. CARD, however, regards Pigue as a uranium-mining supporter.

Moderator Jeff Boulter from Colorado State University temporarily stopped the proceedings and said he'd toss out questions if he didn't think they had anything to do with the mining operation. He threw out five.

CARD has asked the Nunn board of trustees to pass a resolution against in-situ mining within three miles of town. Parsons said the resolution would not stop Powertech from mining, but it would be a factor considered by other government agencies that will review Powertech's permit applications.

Prior to press time, the Nunn city clerk did not return phone calls asking if such a resolution was on the board's agenda.

Here is the basic bone of contention: Powertech wants to use an in-situ mining process to tap the uranium deposits that lie up to 600 feet underground west of Nunn. Called the Centennial Project, all of the area proposed for mining is located in Weld County a few miles from Interstate 25.

With in-situ leaching, Powertech would use chemicals to "loosen" the uranium and then pump it out of the underground formation. Once the uranium is extracted, the company is mandated by state law to restore the groundwater to its original state. The process, said Dick Clement, president and CEO of Powertech USA, is safe — so safe that he would not worry about such a mine if it started up next to his house.

CARD doesn't believe Powertech. CARD contends that the company will contaminate the aquifer beyond its capacity to repair. Letting the company mine is too risky, CARD argues, because that aquifer is a major source of drinking water. Powertech denies that possibility, saying the section the company wants to mine for uranium is in effect "walled off" from the rest of the aquifer.

Clement tried to reassure area residents that the process was safe by pointing out that Powertech's chief operating officer, Wallace Mays, was looking at land in the area for a cattle operation.

Dr. Michael Paddock of CARD observed that Mays should have no trouble finding property with all the "For Sale" signs going up because of the news that a uranium mine was going to open there.

Mays countered that land prices were dropping because of unsubstantiated rumors about the operation and because of the bad economy.

Powertech kept emphasizing the process was safe. Mays said he has been in the uranium mining business for more than 40 years and said he had cleaned up groundwater a number of times. Furthermore, there were no instances of people living near uranium mines having health problems, he said.

Clement said the project would result in great economic benefits for the area. The company, Clement said, would be investing \$20 million. It would have 125 employees with a \$3 million to \$4 million payroll and generate \$420,000 in severance taxes.

Furthermore, Mays said, Powertech owns the land and the mineral rights and no one is going to tell it how to mine on its own land. Parsons said the idea that owning mineral rights gives a company a right to mine is ridiculous. Mineral rights, Parsons said, give the right to apply for a permit to mine.

Paddock said organizations like Powertech have a lousy track record of cleaning up groundwater. Parsons and Paddock said mining companies usually lobby local regulatory agencies to adjust the baseline necessary to assure clean water. Then a company applies for a waiver, claiming the water cannot get any cleaner.

“They will be gone in 20 years,” said Paddock. “How long are we here? Forever.”

Jay Davis, a civil engineer and CARD member, dangled a list of examples of companies changing the groundwater restoration baselines in other operations in Texas.

“They say they don’t, but they’ve done it before,” Davis said. “And the proof is right here.”

http://www.thewellingtonweekly.com/Archives/news/July/071509/n_uranium_071509.html