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## Interior to Place 2-Year Hold on New Hardrock Mining Near Grand Canyon

By ERIC BONTRAGER of [Greenwire](#)

The Interior Department will temporarily block new hardrock mining tomorrow on 1 million acres surrounding the Grand Canyon.

In a notice set for publication in the *Federal Register*, the department says it will place a two-year hold on leasing on Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management land near Grand Canyon National Park while it studies the environmental effects of hardrock exploration and mining.

The proposed withdrawal area includes public lands in Arizona's Coconino and Mohave counties, portions of Kaibab National Forest and BLM lands near Vermilion Cliffs National Monument.

Depending on the results of the environmental studies, Interior could extend the withdrawal for up to 20 years, according to the notice.

Interior Secretary Ken Salazar is expected to announce the decision later today, ahead of a House National Parks Subcommittee hearing tomorrow on a proposal that would permanently bar new uranium exploration around the Grand Canyon ([E&E Daily](#), July 20).

Subcommittee Chairman Raúl Grijalva's (D-Ariz.) bill, [H.R. 644 \(pdf\)](#), would permanently withdraw lands identified in the Interior notice in a bid to stop rampant uranium exploration near the iconic national park.

There have been more than 8,000 uranium claims within the withdrawal area, three-quarters of which have been staked in recent years in a bid to take advantage of rising prices for the nuclear fuel.

Velma Smith, manager of the Pew Campaign for Responsible Mining, said the Obama administration's action is welcome, but it does not remove the need for Grijalva's legislation. She said the bill would protect the Grand Canyon and nearby communities from environmental and health problems caused by past uranium mining.

"The administration doesn't have the authority to make this withdrawal permanent, but Congress

does," Smith said.

National Mining Association spokesman Luke Popovich questioned the need for a hold on leasing -- which he called "a de facto withdrawal and mining shutdown" -- given that there are already rules in place to protect the environment from hardrock activities.

He pointed to a 1999 report by the National Academy of Sciences that concluded that environmental laws then were effective. Since that report was released, he added, additional protections have been put in place.

"It's hard to see how this is anything more than unnecessarily obstruction," Popovich said.

Last year, the House Natural Resources Committee employed its rarely used emergency authority to order then-Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne to temporarily withdraw the 1 million acres from future hardrock mining.

Kempthorne refused, disputing the panel's authority to order such withdrawals under the 1976 Federal Land Policy and Management Act, followed by a BLM rule change that prohibited congressional withdrawals.

The Sierra Club, Center for Biological Diversity, and Grand Canyon Trust sued Interior to carry out the order. Taylor McKinnon, the center's public lands campaigns director, said the groups have begun settlement discussions with the department.

"The fact that today's notice, in effect, enacts the same protections as the emergency withdrawal, is in our view very favorable," McKinnon said.

[Click here](#) (pdf) to view the *Federal Register* notice.

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